The Neoliberal Economy of Food: Evaluating the Ability of the Local Food System around Athens, Ohio to Address Food Insecurity

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Angela M. Chapman
August 2017
© 2017 Angela M. Chapman. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
The Neoliberal Economy of Food: Evaluating the Ability of the Local Food System
around Athens, Ohio to Address Food Insecurity

by

ANGELA M. CHAPMAN

has been approved for
the Department of Geography
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Harold A. Perkins
Associate Professor of Geography

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

CHAPMAN, ANGELA M., M.A., August 2017, Geography

The Neoliberal Economy of Food: Evaluating the Ability of the Local Food System around Athens, Ohio to Address Food Insecurity

Director of Thesis: Harold A. Perkins

Local food systems have emerged as a potential solution to both the ills of the neoliberal global food system and as a means of increasing the food security of low-income people through access to healthy, locally grown foods. However, many of the claims about local food systems are largely unsubstantiated. Although empirical research provides evidence of the difficulty food systems encounter addressing food insecurity due to deeply imbedded structures such as inequality, neoliberal entitlement cuts, and the market-based economy, additional research is needed to understand the relationship between these processes at the local level better. The Athens County, Ohio region has a thriving local food system with hundreds of individuals working to facilitate and promote the local food system. Despite this vibrant local food scene, in 2015, Athens County had a food insecurity rate of 20.4 percent that is higher than the national average of 13.4. This research addresses ways in which the local food system in the Athens region exhibits elements of neoliberalism through themes of market development, emphasis on personal responsibility, and reliance on charity. These themes are indicative of the neoliberal shift of responsibility for well-being away from the state towards individuals and community groups and the belief that the market is the site where social issues like food security are best addressed. Each of these themes creates its own set of constraints for actors in the
local food system and limits their ability to decrease low-income food insecurity. Based on these findings, a set of best practices is provided to counter neoliberal tendencies in the local food system and better address local food insecurity.

*Keywords: political economy, neoliberalism, food security, local food systems, scale*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to my advisor, Dr. Harold Perkins, whose constructive criticism, positive attitude, and sage advice have both made this thesis possible and cemented his position as a lifelong mentor and friend. I also owe gratitude to Dr. Risa Whitson and Dr. Tom Smucker for serving on my thesis committee and providing support throughout my graduate career at Ohio University. Furthermore, I would like to thank all the professors in the Department of Geography with whom I have worked or from whom I have taken a course. The examples each has set have helped shape me and prepare me for my future career. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to the Department of Geography for helping to fund this research through the Isaac Sindiga Memorial Fund for Geography.

I would also like to thank my husband, Tanner, whose loving support made it possible for me to complete this thesis. His continued belief in me and our future have made this journey worthwhile. I also want to recognize the friends I have made at Ohio University over the past two years, especially Sabrina Paskewitz and Meredith Stone. Their help and encouragement has been invaluable and I am grateful to have had such wonderful women with whom to navigate graduate school.

Finally, I am grateful to everyone within the Athens area local food system who agreed to be interviewed and welcomed me into their community for the short time I was in Athens.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acknowledgments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Tables</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Figures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2: Literature Review</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Food Systems as Neoliberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualizing Food Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualizing Food Insecurity under Neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Food Systems as Counter to Neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3: Methods and Data</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: Results and Discussion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: Does the Local Food System in the Athens Area Exhibit Elements of Neoliberalism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat to Charity for Economic Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Responsibility of Consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Do These Neoliberal Elements Affect the Ability of Actors in the Local Food System to Increase Access and Food Security among Athens County’s Low-Income Residents?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Vision for the Local Food System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everybody Here Should Be Making More Money”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Price of Local Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on Personal Responsibility and the Lack of a Welcoming Environment for Low-Income Consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofits Constrained by Funding Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofits are Not Equipped to Address Necessary Scales for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5: Conclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1  Socioeconomic Indicators for Athens County, the State of Ohio, and the United States ................................................................. 15
Table 2  Interview Participants and Job Roles ............................................................................................................. 43
Table 3  Food-Related Nonprofits in the Athens Area and their Missions ........................................ 44
Table 4  Research Phases ................................................................................................................................. 45
LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1. Location of Athens County, Ohio within Appalachia ........................................ 14
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2015, in the United States, approximately one in eight people lacked food security, the consistent access to safe and nutritious food (CFS 2012, Feeding America 2017b). Food insecurity is highest among “households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, households with children headed by single women or single men, women living alone, and Black- and Hispanic-headed households” (Coleman-Jensen et al 2016, vi). Additionally, although food insecure people live throughout the United States, the rate of food insecurity is highest in rural areas. Over the past several decades, many federal entitlement programs aimed at increasing food security have been reduced (Perkins 2012, Poppendieck 1998). These programs include food stamps, which are designed to enhance the food security of low-income Americans by increasing their food budgets (Kaiser 2013). Since 2008, the Food Stamp Program in the United States has been renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (Kaiser 2013). Such entitlement programs continue to be at risk, with the Trump administration’s 2018 fiscal year budget proposal, released in May 2017, calling for a decrease of federal spending on SNAP by nearly $191 billion through 2027 (EOPOTUS 2017). The retrenchment of entitlement programs reflects the dominance of the neoliberal school of political economic thought and its focus on the responsibility of individuals for their well-being and that social welfare can be addressed best through the liberalization of markets (Harvey 2005).

As entitlement programs are retrenched, the responsibility for providing food to low-income people has transferred in large part to local charity and nonprofit programs.
The reliance upon this ‘retreat to charity’ (Poppendieck 1998) is demonstrated by a report from the USDA (2016a), stating that in 2014, in addition to their SNAP benefits, more than one-third of SNAP participants required the use of food pantries and emergency kitchens to feed their households. Although such charity and emergency food programs are well intended, they are not reliable methods of addressing food security, as they depend upon the charitable giving of others and offer no legal guarantee of access to food (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006, Poppendieck 1998). Thus, despite help from SNAP and charity food programs, in 2015, 13.4 percent of Americans, over 42 million people, were food insecure, lacking consistent access to sufficient food (Feeding America 2017a). In addition to affecting anti-hunger initiatives, neoliberal policies have also promoted the industrialization, privatization, and deregulation of markets, which has led to an increasingly more globalized and commodified food system (Harvey 2005, McMichael 2005). This global food system is rife with social, environmental, and economic problems (Guthman 2008), and as Galt (2014) has noted, these problems have become common knowledge among many consumers.

As awareness of the harms caused by industrial agriculture and the neoliberal global food system has increased, local food systems have emerged as a potential solution to both the ills of the neoliberal global food system and as a means of increasing food security through access to healthy, locally grown food (Martinez et al 2010). Local food systems may be defined in many different ways and there is no standard definition for what constitutes one. However, common methods of delineation are including food grown only within a certain geographical proximity (ex. a fifty mile radius), food grown
or produced within a political boundary, and the direct-to-consumer or direct-to-retail marketing of food (Hinrichs 2003, Martinez et al 2010, Schnell 2013b). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses direct-to-consumer sales of agricultural goods to track local food systems, and this metric provides evidence that the market share of local food is increasing in the United States (Martinez et al 2010). For example, in the decade between 2002 and 2012, direct-to-consumer sales of agricultural goods increased from just over $812 million to over $1.3 billion (USDA 2002, USDA 2012a). In that same period, the number of farmers markets, another measure of local food systems, increased from 3,137 to 7,864 in the United States (USDA 2015b).

Some of the many benefits of local food systems touted by academics include growth of the local economy, shortened food supply chains, decreased food miles, and increased access to fresh and healthy foods (Feagan 2007, Marsden, Banks, and Bristow 2000, Nabhan 2006, Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003, Schnell 2013b). Consumers have also provided many of these same reasons to explain their preference for locally produced food. Schnell’s (2013b) interviews with CSA members revealed motivations for participation in the local food system including eating fresh and in-season food, sustainability, reducing their carbon footprint, supporting the local economy and small businesses, community building, and knowing the farmer and where food comes from. However, none of these claims is without critique. For example, Mariola (2008) questions the assertion that food produced locally is more energy efficient than its conventional counterparts, and Martinez et al (2010) point out that the touted health benefits to consumers of local food are not yet fully substantiated. In addition, scholars
have noted that local food systems are not necessarily better or more just than the neoliberal global food system (Born and Purcell 2006), and often operate within the same neoliberal paradigm (Guthman 2008). This brings into question the ability of local food systems to address justice issues such as food insecurity that have been perpetuated by the neoliberal economy. The Athens, Ohio area provides an example of a vibrant local food system that is not fully addressing the needs of its high number of low-income, food-insecure residents.

Athens County is located in Southeast Ohio and the North Central Subregion of Appalachia (Figure 1; Appalachian Regional Commission 2009). Athens County has suffered economically for many years. For the 2017 fiscal year, the Appalachian Regional Commission (2017a) designated Athens County as economically ‘at-risk.’ Counties with this designation “are those at risk of becoming economically distressed. They rank between the worst 10 percent and 25 percent of the nation’s counties” (Appalachian Regional Commission 2017b). However, this is only the second year since 2002 that the county received this designation. In every other year except 2008, Athens County received the economic designation of ‘distressed’ (Appalachian Regional Commission 2017a). Distressed counties rank in the bottom ten percent of all counties in the United States in unemployment, per capita market income, and poverty rate (Appalachian Regional Commission 2017b).
In 2015, Athens County had an estimated population of 65,886, of which 91.2 percent was white (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). The County’s estimated median household income from 2011 to 2015 was $33,872, with 33.0 percent of the population below the poverty level, more than double the national rate and the highest poverty rate of any county in the state of Ohio (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a, U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). In January 2017, the unemployment rate in Athens County was 7.7 percent (BLS 2017b). From 2010 to 2014, the rate of housing units that were owner-occupied was 56.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). Table 1 displays these socioeconomic indicators for Athens County, the United States, and Ohio for comparison.
Table 1

Socioeconomic Indicators for Athens County, the State of Ohio, and the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athens County</th>
<th>Ohio</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income (2011-2015)(^1)</td>
<td>$33,872</td>
<td>$49,429</td>
<td>$53,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons in Poverty (2011-2015)(^2)</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate (January 2017)</td>
<td>7.7%(^3)</td>
<td>5.0%(^3)</td>
<td>4.8%(^4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-Occupied Housing Unit Rate (2011-2015)(^1)</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Food Insecurity Rate (2015)(^5)</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Food Insecurity Rate (2015)(^5)</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Assistance: Percent of Population (2015)</td>
<td>~15.6%(^6)</td>
<td>~14.3%(^6)</td>
<td>~14.2%(^7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)U.S. Census Bureau 2017b, \(^2\)U.S. Census Bureau 2017a, \(^3\)BLS 2017b, \(^4\)BLS 2017a, \(^5\)Feeding America 2017a, \(^6\)Ohio JFS 2015 and U.S. Census Bureau 2017b, \(^7\)USDA 2017b

There are five farmers markets in Athens County, located in the cities of Athens, Nelsonville, Albany, and Shade, and on the campus of Ohio University (Athens County Visitors Bureau 2014b, Ohio University 2016). The Athens Farmers Market, located in the city of Athens, is the largest of the five, with over eighty vendors listed on their website (Athens Farmers Market). The Athens Farmers Market defines local as a “150 Mile radius of Athens, Ohio.” This definition is used in this research to delineate the local food system in order to avoid excluding any producers who participate in the Athens Farmers Market, which is the centerpiece of the Athens area local food system. Athens Farmers Market vendors produce a variety of foods such as fruits, vegetables, prepared foods, cheeses, meats, baked goods, honey, maple syrup, grains, and eggs. They also sell
non-edible products such as soap, flowers, compost, dog foods, plants, and animal fibers (Athens Farmers Market). Beyond farmers markets, the Athens area has several Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs (Local Harvest 2017), and a ‘30 Mile Meal’ challenge, in which over thirty restaurants, markets, and other food-related businesses participate by sourcing foods from within thirty miles (Athens County Visitors Bureau 2014a). A key source of local food for participants in the 30 Mile Meal challenge is the Chesterhill Produce Auction, located in neighboring Morgan County. The auction is located in a rural setting about twenty miles away from the city of Athens, and is considered by practitioners to be a rural food access point. The auction is a social enterprise and market-based food aggregation point operated by a local nonprofit. In fact, Athens County is home to a number of nonprofit organizations working to support local farmers and food entrepreneurs, build the local food economy, increase access to local food, and improve the health of the local population.

Despite the vibrancy of the local food system, Athens County residents suffer high rates of food insecurity. In 2015, the overall food insecurity rate of all Athens County residents was 20.4 percent and the rate among children was 26.8 percent, both of which are higher than the state and national averages (Table 1; Feeding America 2017a). Food-insecure people fit into a variety of socioeconomic categories and are not a homogenous group. For example, although food insecurity tends to be highest among low-income people, an estimated 26 percent of food-insecure people in the United States earn incomes that are too high to qualify for nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP (Feeding America 2017b). However, in Athens County, 70 percent of residents were at or
below 130 percent of the federal poverty level in 2015, and therefore eligible to receive SNAP benefits based on their income alone (Feeding America 2017a), but only 15.6 percent were enrolled in SNAP in 2015 (Ohio JFS 2015, U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). This discrepancy is likely due to factors other than income that reduce eligibility as well as to eligible households that do not apply for benefits. Among Athens County households with children enrolled in Head Start, a program that serves low-income households, Holben et al (2004) found that 48.8 percent of households were food insecure. Although this is not representative of the county at large, as low-income households are more likely to be food insecure in the first place, it does indicate the high rate of food insecurity amongst the low-income population of Athens County. Such a high rate of food insecurity seems surprising in an area with apparently high levels of local food production, leading one to wonder whom the local food system is actually serving.

Many people who frequent the Athens Farmers Market will anecdotally state that its customers are primarily educated, affluent people, employed by Ohio University, and that most other people in the county purchase food at Walmart and other retail chains. In a pilot study of SNAP participants shopping at the Athens Farmers Market, Bilecki (2012) found that the majority of patrons using SNAP had a college degree. Indeed, the Athens Farmers Market website notes that Athens has “the right mix of ingredients – small growers, educated citizens, and a regional commercial center – to take advantage of a growing interest in fresh, quality food and local products.” This indicates that the typical customer at the Athens Farmers Market, despite income level, is well-educated.
However, from 2011 to 2015, only 29.1 percent of Athens County residents over the age of twenty-five held a bachelor’s degree or higher, slightly lower than the national average of 29.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). If Athens Farmers Market customers tend to hold college degrees, it seems the remaining 70.1 percent of Athens County residents are not being served by the local food system.

The purpose of this research thus lies in understanding the extant paradox of high levels of food insecurity in a location with a vibrant local food system. The aim is twofold. First, to ascertain in what ways the Athens area local food system, defined as food produced and distributed within a one-hundred-fifty mile radius around the city of Athens, Ohio, might exhibit elements of neoliberalism. Neoliberalized food systems display elements such as a producer-driven, market-based focus and emphasis on personal responsibility of consumers. The second aim is to understand how these neoliberal tendencies affect the ability of the local food system to increase the food security of Athens County’s low-income residents. Before addressing these concerns, I will review the literature pertinent to these topics in order to situate the analysis that follows.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005, 2)

Since the 1980s, neoliberal political economic theory and practices are hegemonic in the United States (Harvey 2005, Lapavitsas 2005, Palley 2005). Previously, from the end of the Second World War until about 1980, the theories of economist John Maynard Keynes had been dominant (Lapavitsas 2005, Palley 2005). Keynes disputed many commonly held economic beliefs, including Say’s Law, which stated that under normal conditions supply and demand tend to be equal, and only in an economic crisis does supply become greater than demand. Keynes argued that demand is always lower than supply and that this justifies constant economic intervention by the state to create balance between supply and demand, redistribute wealth, and ensure the welfare of the people (Lapavitsas 2005, Palley 2005). The term “demand-side economics” is used to describe the Keynesian focus on building demand to resolve economic problems (Feldstein 1986, 26). Part of the demand-side approach was to expand social welfare programs, focusing on unemployment, health, education, housing, and food security, the latter of which was used to bolster farm profits (Harvey 2005, Lapavitsas 2005). In addition, policies and programs that protected workers’ rights increased, such as trade unions and minimum wage laws (Harvey 2005, Palley 2005). During the Keynesian era, many positive economic phenomena occurred, such as stable employment and rising real wages.
(Lapavitsas 2005). However, by the 1970s, Keynesian policies were losing their power in political and economic circles due to divisions among Keynesian economists and the inability to compete with the emerging neoliberal idea of ‘free markets’ in public understanding of the economy, particularly with the ongoing economic crises post-1973 (Harvey 2005, Lapavitsas 2005, Palley 2005, 21). Influential economists of that time came to believe that the Keynesian focus on demand ignored potential ways to increase supply such as, “capital accumulation, technical progress, improvements in the quality of the labor force, freedom from regulatory interference, and increases in personal incentives” (Feldstein 1986, 26). By 1980, the political economic system had shifted to a focus on free markets at the expense of demand-side policies.

The new approach, adopted to address inflation and the stagnant economy that was ongoing through the 1970s, became known as ‘supply-side’ economics to emphasize its difference from the Keynesian demand-side approach of the past (Feldstein 1986, Harvey 2005). In the United States, business-friendly supply-side policies took the form of deregulation of finance and industry, tax cuts for corporations and the wealthiest citizens, and assaults on trade unions (Guthman 2008, Harvey 2005). Supply-side policies fall within the realm of neoliberal theory, a revival of nineteenth-century liberal theories, such as laissez-faire economics (Palley 2005). Neoliberal theory emphasizes individual freedom, free markets, free trade, and that the role of the state should be primarily to ensure that markets flourish (Harvey 2005, Jessop 2002). Neoliberalism’s proponents believe that the solutions to society’s problems lie in increasing the “reach and frequency of market transactions” and bringing “all human action into the domain of the market”
(Harvey 2005, 3). In neoliberal theory, it is the market, not the state, which ensures the welfare of the people, thus eliminating the need for social welfare programs and trade unions (Alkon and Mares 2012, Palley 2005).

In practice, neoliberalization assumes different forms. As Harvey (2005, 21) notes, there is often a “tension between the theory of neoliberalism and the actual pragmatics of neoliberalization.” Neoliberalization is the process through which neoliberal theory is transposed into ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002). For example, neoliberal theory promotes a market free from state intervention, while most states that have embraced neoliberalism have not stopped intervening in markets. This inconsistency occurs as “pragmatism has forced neoliberal policy makers to depart from theory” (Palley 2005, 23). Such inconsistencies often take the form of price fixing and corporate subsidies, which tamper with the free market. This has not gone unnoticed among corporate executives:

There isn’t one grain of anything in the world that is sold in a free market. Not one! The only place you see a free market is in the speeches of politicians.

(Dwayne Andreas, former Archer Daniels Midland CEO, quoted in Carney 1995)

Divergences between neoliberal theory and actual neoliberalization are also evident during economic crises when states intervene to cut taxes, lower interest rates, and increase public spending (Lapavitsas 2005). Although such discrepancies between theory and reality exist, the basic tenet that neoliberalism is the ideal form for capitalist economies persists, and the neoliberal ideal that free markets will lead to social good has not abated (Lapavitsas 2005). Neoliberal theory has affected individuals as well as states and corporations. After all, according to Harvey (2005, 5), the political ideals of “human
dignity and individual freedom” embraced by neoliberal theorists are “compelling and seductive.” The term ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ has evolved to describe the ways that “market logic increasingly pervades individuals’ and communities’ everyday thoughts and practices as we embrace such ideals as individualism, efficiency, and self-help” (Alkon and Mares 2012, 348).

Despite the continued desire of neoliberal theorists to use markets as a solution to social and economic ills, many problems persist or have worsened. For example, since 1980, economic growth has decreased and income inequality has increased both internationally and within countries compared to the years 1945 to 1980, when Keynesianism was dominant (Palley 2005, 25). Additionally, market-based solutions to social justice issues tend to release the state of its responsibility to ensure the welfare of its citizens, passing the duty to the private sector and community-based groups that are not equipped to address the scale of need in most countries (Alkon and Mares 2012, Harrison 2008). In the United States, the rollback of social welfare programs such as food stamps since the 1980s and drastic increase in the number of community food pantries evidence this (Perkins 2012, Poppendieck 1998).

Global Food Systems as Neoliberal

There is a mistaken belief that the greatest agricultural need in the developing world is to develop the capacity to grow food for local consumption. This is misguided. Countries should produce what they produce best – and trade. (Cargill Chair quoted in Lynas 2001, quoted in McMichael 2005, 290)

Since the 1980s, neoliberalization has affected most of the world as institutions such as the United States government, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank, have pushed neoliberal theory into practice in developing countries (Lapavitsas 2005). In
the 1990s, these groups came together to draft a set of policies and guiding principles to push developing countries towards economic growth (Lapavitsas 2005). Known as the Washington Consensus, these policies include liberalizing markets, privatizing state enterprises, removing barriers to foreign investment, and increasing trade. The results of the Washington Consensus on agriculture have led to the development of the ‘corporate food regime’ model (McMichael 2005). This model describes the ways in which the free trade and privatization of agriculture have secured global corporate influence over the food system. Scholars describe the neoliberal global food system as “corporate-friendly” and potentially “crippling to state autonomy” (Pechlaner and Otero 2010, 181).

In the United States, neoliberal business-friendly and deregulatory policies have allowed for corporate dominance of agriculture, effectively eliminating most small-scale competition. For example, Cargill, a U.S.-based agrifood corporation, controls about 45 percent of the global grain trade and is the “largest privately owned corporation in the world” (Young 2012, 121). In 1998, four corporations controlled over 60 percent of the market for corn seeds in the United States (Fernandez-Cornejo 2004). From the 1920s through the 1970s, antitrust laws were in place to prevent a monopoly in the meatpacking industry (Schlosser 2002). However, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration chose not to enforce these laws, allowing large meatpacking corporations to merge. This led to increased market concentration for the four largest meatpackers from 21 percent to 84 percent between 1970 and 2002 (Schlosser 2002). These are only a few examples of the corporate control of domestic agriculture that has increased over the past several decades. When alternatives to the neoliberal global food system, such as local or organic foods, do
develop, they are often co-opted by the neoliberal model of agriculture to which they were originally resistant (Delind 2013). For example, organic foods are now largely produced on the same industrial scale and with the same national and international distribution and systems of trade as conventional industrial agriculture.

Another seemingly contradictory aspect of the actually existing neoliberalization of large-scale food systems are government subsidies of commodity crops, such as corn and soy, which are processed into cheap, energy-dense foods (Kaiser 2013). These subsidies represent the neoliberal state intervening to assist in the development of globally competitive commodity crop markets ( Harvey 2005). Meanwhile, fruits and vegetables, considered ‘specialty crops’ ( Senate 2008), are not subsidized, and cost more for consumers. The high price of fresh fruits and vegetables compared to processed foods made from subsidized crops is a significant challenge in increasing their consumption (Aubrey 2016). Since 1985, the prices for soft drinks, fats and oils, and sugar, produced from subsidized crops, have increased by about 20 to 45 percent, while the price of fresh fruits and vegetables increased nearly 120 percent (Kaiser 2013). Government subsidization creates these artificially low prices making energy-dense, low-nutrient foods more financially accessible to low-income people (Kaiser 2013). Diets consisting of such foods are linked to poor nutrition, obesity, cardiovascular problems, type-2 diabetes, and child development issues (Kaiser 2013, Siegel et al 2016). A shocking 50 percent of the American population has diabetes, but it is not distributed equally amongst the population: people in low-income households have both increased vulnerability and prevalence of the disease (Kaiser 2013). Siegel et al (2016) found that “younger, poorer,
less educated, and less food-secure individuals consumed diets with disproportionately higher proportions of subsidized food commodities” (1129). Low-income people are more likely to consume diets high in cheap processed foods made from subsidized commodities and are more likely to be food-insecure. Although the subsidies described above may not seem to adhere to neoliberal theory as they tamper with the market, it is important to remember that ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ is often different from neoliberal theory (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002). Despite these divergences from neoliberal theory, the idea that market-based approaches will lead to social good remains widespread (Lapavitsas 2005).

Conceptualizing Food Security

The Committee on World Food Security of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as “when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle” (CFS 2012, 5). In the United States, food security has been measured annually by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 1995 (USDA 2016e). These agencies conduct a representative survey of American households in which respondents are asked a variety of questions relating to their perceptions of their own food security and ability to access food (Coleman-Jensen et al 2015, USDA 2016e). Questions include whether, in the previous twelve months, their households have run out of food or money to buy food or if they have had to cut or skip meals and the frequency with which these events occur (USDA 2012b). Survey respondents are classified into three categories:
those with food security, low food security, and very low food security (Coleman-Jensen et al 2015). Households with low food security often have difficulty accessing food, which affects their diets. Very low food security is the most severe form of food insecurity, and describes households who have reported multiple occasions of “reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to inadequate resources for food (Coleman-Jensen et al 2015, 4). In reporting food security statistics, both low and very low food security are often combined and described more generally as food insecurity.

The survey tool used by the U.S. Census Bureau and USDA reflects an international trend of focusing on individual and household access to food and measuring personal perceptions of food security, rather than focusing on the global production of food (Maxwell 2001). In fact, definitions and framings of food security have evolved over the past several decades. Maxwell (2001, 14) discusses three paradigm shifts in thinking about food security since the 1970s: first, a change “from the global and the national to the household and the individual;” second, a shift “from a ‘food first’ perspective to a livelihood perspective;” and third, a change “from objective indicators to subjective perception.” These paradigm shifts have created significant change in the agenda of food security proponents from a focus on national food supply and the price of food to concern “with the complexities of livelihood strategies in difficult and uncertain environments, and with understanding how people themselves respond to perceived risks and uncertainties” (Maxwell 2001, 21). Economist Amartya Sen contributed to these shifts by rejecting the Malthusian focus on increasing supplies of food to ensure food security and noting that famines can take place without a decline in production (Watts
Despite these shifts in thinking about food security, proponents of neoliberalization have continued to push for increasing the global supply of food and use the goal of increasing food security to justify their actions (Woods 2012).

Contextualizing Food Insecurity under Neoliberalism

Neoliberal theory warrants the globalization and industrialization of agriculture in the quest for increased food security, with the intention of increasing the global production of food (Woods 2012). However, Kneafsey et al (2013) assert that this neoliberal, supply-side economics emphasis on increased production alone cannot adequately address food security in either developed or developing countries. Rather, food system stakeholders must place emphasis on price, nutritional value, quality, and access to food to address food insecurity thoroughly. McMichael (2015) builds on this, stating that support of small farmers through public investment is crucial for domestic food security, a distinctly different approach than the commodity crop subsidy system that currently dominates agriculture in the United States.

As neoliberalism holds that the solution to social problems is the expansion of markets (Harvey 2005), many projects designed to decrease food insecurity rely on markets. The popular food writer Michael Pollan (2006) has called for market-based solutions, and coined the phrase “market-as-movement” as a means of addressing problems in the food system by “voting with your fork” to support healthy and sustainable food options. This type of approach frames individual consumption rather than collective action as the site of political activism (Guthman 2008). Market-based approaches to food security divert the responsibility of addressing food insecurity away
from the state and towards communities and individuals (Alkon and Mares 2012). The emphasis on markets as a means of increasing food security expands beyond popular media. The USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP) is one example of the state encouraging such an approach (USDA 2016b).

Started in 1996, the CFPCGP is “a program to fight food insecurity through developing community food projects that help promote the self-sufficiency of low-income communities” and provides one-time grants to nonprofit organizations operating “multipurpose community food projects” (USDA 2016b). The program encourages entrepreneurial initiatives and partnerships between nonprofit and for-profit food entities, which are indicative of neoliberal ideologies present in the program. In addition, two of the six goals of the program clearly reflect neoliberal ideals. First, the program is designed to “increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs” and second, to “create innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers” (USDA 2016b). However, the ability of such market-based approaches to provide food that is financially accessible to low-income consumers has been drawn into question by empirical research (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006, Pilgeram 2011). In addition, Sen has noted that when entitlements, or methods of meeting food needs, are attached to individuals through markets, they “may shift in complex ways among differing classes, occupational groups, and sections of the population” (Watts 2000, 200). When markets are the primary means of achieving food security, not all socioeconomic groups will have equal access.
Many academics instead believe that the best way to address food insecurity is with a rights-based approach, recognizing access to nutritious food as a human right rather than a privilege for those with the economic resources to obtain it (Anderson 2013, McMichael 2015). Rights-based approaches include federal entitlement programs such as food stamps, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) since 2008 (USDA 2014). SNAP is controlled and funded through the U.S. Farm Bill Nutrition title, which is the principle piece of legislation used to improve the nutrition and food security of United States citizens (Kaiser 2013). SNAP eligibility is based on income and assets and is designed to boost the food budgets of low-income people and has the potential to increase significantly the food security of millions of Americans (Kaiser 2013). However, several problems prevent it from meeting this goal.

One problem is that the Thrifty Food Plan, on which SNAP benefits are based, is not an adequate measure of real food costs. The level of spending in the Thrifty Food Plan is intended only for temporary, emergency use, and is not sufficient in the long-term to ensure food security (Landers 2007, Poppendieck 1998). In 2017, the average monthly SNAP benefit per person is $124.92, which provides just over four dollars per day, or about $1.39 per meal (USDA 2017c). Evidence shows that SNAP users are more likely to eat low-quality, processed foods and more likely to be obese than an average American (Dimitri and Rogus 2014), which may be due to the insufficient benefits it provides. Although SNAP does increase recipients’ food budgets, if used to support a low-quality diet, it is not truly meeting its goal of enhancing food security. Another issue is that increases to SNAP benefits have lagged behind inflation (Perez 2011). Since SNAP is an
entitlement program that is based solely on financial need (Landers 2007), SNAP benefits need to be rapidly adjusted to reflect changes in the U.S. economy, including inflation.

Food stamps were widespread before neoliberal policies, rolled out in the 1970s and 1980s, led to decreases in the social welfare programs provided by the state in favor of market-based approaches (Harvey 2005, Perkins 2012, Poppendieck 1998). The significant cutbacks to these entitlement programs have led to a ‘retreat to charity’ (Poppendieck 1998, 9), which leaves charitable and nonprofit food programs largely responsible for addressing food insecurity (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006, Perkins 2012, Poppendieck 1998). The ‘retreat to charity’ is demonstrated by a USDA (2016a) report, stating that in 2014, more than one-third of SNAP participants required the use of food pantries and emergency kitchens to feed their households in addition to their SNAP benefits. SNAP alone is not meeting the food security needs of the low-income population in the United States. As charitable food programs fill the space left by entitlement cuts, they reinforce the idea that addressing food insecurity is their role, and not the role of the state (Alkon and Mares 2012). The food charity model is further problematic because it relies on the generosity of volunteers and donors, and does not provide a steady supply of assistance, nor does it legally guarantee food access (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006, Poppendieck 1998). These neoliberal shifts contribute to food insecurity and put more pressure on local food systems to be part of the solution.
Local Food Systems as Counter to Neoliberalism

Some academics consider local food systems to be both more environmentally friendly and better able to address the food security of local populations than neoliberal corporate food systems, justifying localization (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Woods 2012). In addition, the localization of food systems is often presented as a reaction to neoliberal globalization (Hinrichs 2003, Schnell 2013a). People foster ties to their local communities by choice, to counter the anonymous nature of globalization and build identities linked to a sense of place, which have been lost in an increasingly global world (Schnell 2013a). However, this reactionary stance can foster a falsely dualistic view, when in fact the global and the local interact with each other and are interdependent (Feagan 2007, Hinrichs 2003). Additionally, the capitalization and globalization of agriculture have been associated together to the extent that the two are often conflated, leading to the belief that localization is the solution to the problems of its counterpart, globalization (Born and Purcell 2006).

It is important, however, not to fall into the ‘local trap’ and unquestioningly consider local food systems as fundamentally better than the neoliberal global food system. As scale is a social construction, the scale of a food system does not inherently change its social or environmental effects or its ability to address social problems (Born and Purcell 2006). Furthermore, achieving ideals such as social justice should be the goal of a food system, using scale as a strategy to achieve the goal. Although local systems may not be inherently better than those of a larger scale, they do provide a foundation for a world in which “values other than the purely economic shape our lived reality” (Schnell
This does not mean, however, that local food systems do not involve economic values. In many cases, the very “projects [set up] in opposition to neoliberalizations of the food and agricultural sectors seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms, spaces of governance and mentalities” (Guthman 2008, 1171). However, not all local food systems are set up ‘in opposition to neoliberalization.’ Allen et al (2003) recognize two types of resistance among agrifood initiatives: those that are oppositional and “seek to create a new structural configuration” and those that are alternative and “limited to incremental erosion at the edges of the political-economic structures” (61). Those that are alternative may be more likely to (re)produce neoliberal forms than those that are oppositional. This primarily occurs when they rely upon markets for creating change and addressing social problems such as food insecurity (Alkon and Mares 2012, Harrison 2008). Such approaches to food security include supporting local farmers with the goal of building the local economy as a method of addressing social issues (Alkon and Mares 2012).

Because many local food systems employ this supply-side, market-based approach, academics have critiqued the ability of local food systems to address food insecurity, particularly as this approach places the needs of producers over the need for low-income food access (Alkon and Mares 2012, Harrison 2008). For example, Guthman, Morris, and Allen (2006) completed a survey of CSAs and farmers markets in California, and found that these outlets are not capable of addressing food insecurity for low-income people because their primary focus is supply-side, supporting farms and farmers, and not on issues of food access. The authors conclude that federal and state
policies must change to increase infrastructure and funding for entitlement programs, making farmers markets and CSAs more accessible to low-income people and improving the ability of these operations to address food insecurity (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006). In a study of sustainable farmers in the Pacific Northwest, Pilgeram (2011) found that the interaction of the farmers’ socioeconomic backgrounds and the market-based system in which they work made it difficult for them to create affordable foods that were accessible to a wide range of people. Pilgeram concludes that sustainable agriculture must become more socially sustainable, and calls for increased discussion about class inequality, access, and inclusion within sustainable farming.

In addition to the focus on producers, market-based local food systems are critiqued for their inability to provide food that is financially accessible to low-income people (Woods 2012). This problem became evident in Pilgeram’s (2011) study in the case of a small-scale cheese producer, who tried to keep prices down to make her product accessible, but still had to charge seven dollars per pound, a prohibitively high price for low-income people. Along these same lines, Eaton (2008) points out that even promoting produce as ‘pesticide-free’ creates a niche market in which producers may charge higher prices for local produce than for conventionally-grown produce. In this context, it is difficult to consider ways in which small-scale producers can address food access and security issues while considering their bottom line.

Another way that neoliberal market logic pervades local food systems is through the development of the social economy, which is presented as an alternative or ‘third’ economic space between the market and the state (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003).
Activities of the social economy include those that combine “the provision of innovative welfare services, entrepreneurship, employment and training, the production of socially useful goods and services, and the strengthening of vulnerable communities” (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003, 27). Social enterprises are a common feature of the social economy. These are small businesses, often connected to nonprofits, which are set up to generate both social and financial returns on investment (Campbell 2016). Social returns on investment include increased economic activity, entrepreneurship, job creation, and the production of “socially useful services” (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003, 32). However, because such enterprise does not replace the mainstream and because it frequently reproduces market-based ideals, its alterity to neoliberalism is usually minimal. Overall, because local food systems and the work done within them are frequently market-based, they are criticized as neoliberal in nature, and therefore incapable of addressing issues of food security (Perkins 2012).

Through all of this, the questions of how best to address food insecurity remain. Can low-income, food-insecure people find food security through local food systems? Do neoliberal influences on local food systems, when present, limit the ability of food-insecure to meet their food needs locally? These questions form the basis of my research, and relate directly to the research questions guiding this research:

1. Does the local food system in the Athens area exhibit elements of neoliberalism?
2. If so, do these neoliberal elements affect the ability of actors in the local food system to increase access and food security among Athens County’s low-income residents?
While neoliberal elements may be found in local food systems, this does not negate the importance of their alterity to other agrifood systems. Guthman (2008, 1181) reminds us that it can be difficult to identify anything outside of neoliberalism and that “even though actually existing alternatives and resistances seem minute in comparison, that they exist at all is important.” This reflects Gibson-Graham’s (2006) argument that failing to recognize economic diversity serves to reinforce hegemonic notions of capitalism (and neoliberalism) and marginalize or ignore economic alternatives. Although this research focuses on the (re)production of neoliberalism in the Athens area local food system, the intent is not to obscure difference or negate the actions taken by actors in the local food system in their work toward developing alternatives to global food systems. Rather, the purpose is to gain a better understanding of how the neoliberal political economy affects the ability of the actors in the local food system to increase low-income food insecurity locally.

In doing so, this research aims to fill multiple recommendations and gaps from the literature. First, it answers the call made by Eaton (2008) for additional research on how neoliberalism affects different places, taking into consideration contextual complexities. This is accomplished through studying how the neoliberal political economy affects the local-scale food system around Athens, Ohio, with the ability to explore contextual complexities due to the use of qualitative research methods. Second, by studying a location in the United States, it involved analysis of food insecurity in a developed country, which Kneafsey et al (2013) have noted has received little attention. Third, the focus on the local-scale food system in the Athens area is in line with
Pechlaner and Otero’s (2010) belief that the local is the ideal scale for researching the social effects of neoliberalism. Fourth, in analyzing the effects of neoliberalism on a local food system, it meets Guthman’s (2008) call for increased study of neoliberalism that is focused on food and agriculture. Furthermore, this research specifically addresses a gap in the literature regarding the effects of neoliberalism on local food systems, and the subsequent impacts this can have on local food security.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND DATA

Methodology

The specific methods researchers choose to address their research questions are related to their ontological and epistemological perspectives (Winchester and Rofe 2010). In this research, I aim to understand how political economic structures exert influence on the “political, economic, social, and cultural expressions” of individuals, drawing on the critical theory paradigm in geography (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, 45). The ontological perspective of critical theorists is typically historical realism, in which apprehended reality is shaped over time by social, political, and economic factors that are assumed to be real, and are in many ways perceived as real, though they are actually only a form of “virtual or historical reality” (Guba and Lincoln 1998, 205). This ontological perspective fits well with research focused on political economic analysis, as political and economic structures affect human lives and become real to us through these effects. In this way, a system of values or beliefs, or a structure, such as neoliberalism, which has no ‘real’ existence, has real, perceivable effects on lived experiences. This is not to say that individuals do not “have the capacity to break rather than reproduce the mould [sic],” but geographers are often focused on how structures are “built, reproduced, and reified” (Winchester and Rofe 2010, 6). This critical theory approach requires a research method that is capable of examining both structures, individual experiences, and their interaction.

Qualitative research methods are useful for balancing “the fine line between the examination of structures and processes on the one hand and of individuals and their experiences on the other” (Winchester and Rofe 2010, 6). Qualitative methodology
differs from quantitative methods through a focus on understanding and interpreting meanings and experiences rather than on measuring and recording phenomena (Winchester and Rofe 2010). Qualitative research methods were chosen for this research because it aims to understand the impacts of political economic structures and because it relies upon analysis of individual experiences to draw conclusions about larger structures. Qualitative researchers make use of a variety of research methods including, but not limited to, document analysis, interviews, focus groups, and observation, which Davies and Dwyer (2007) call the “backbone of qualitative research in human geography” (257). The specific methods used for this thesis research are interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. These methods make use of the three main types of qualitative research described by Winchester and Rofe (2010): oral, textual, and observational. This use of multiple methods and data sources increases the rigor or trustworthiness of the research through triangulation “to confirm or corroborate results” as it allows the research to be approached from a variety of angles (Hay 2010, 390; Winchester and Rofe 2010).

Rigor is also increased through reflexivity and sharing the researcher’s positionality, or position relative to the project and research participants (Hay 2010). As Winchester and Rofe (2010) note, nearly every aspect of the research process reflects the researchers own values and beliefs. In completing this thesis, I drew on my own experiences and understandings of the research topics. By reflexively defining my position in relation to the research, I can increase the rigor and trustworthiness of the project and its results. My position among, and relationship with, the participants in this research is not simple. While undertaking this research, I was a resident of Athens, a
frequent customer at the Athens Farmers Market, and a member of a community supported agriculture operated by one of the interview participants. I was also a member of one of the nonprofits included in the research, renting a plot in a community garden they operate. During the summer of 2016, I sat on the local Food Policy Council as a voting member along with several interview participants, working on issues of healthy food access and identifying opportunities for policy advocacy. As a woman in my late twenties, I formed bonds with a number of other young women involved with the Food Policy Council who held ideologies similar to my own – critical of the status quo and questioning the assumed alternatives. In addition, since August 2016, I have been enrolled in SNAP and have personally experienced the stigma associated with participation in the program.

In short, I was embedded in my research and truly became a participant in the local food system without attempting to obfuscate my position as a graduate student studying the same local food system. My embedded position among the stakeholders in the local food system also helped me gain access to interview participants. I began gathering data by requesting interviews from key members of the Food Policy Council, with whom I was already acquainted. I also asked many interviewees for recommendations on whom else to interview and let new contacts know who had suggested that I contact them. My position in the local food system aided me in accessing key stakeholders. It is important to note my positionality as it affects both the people and phenomena researched and my understanding of them (Mansvelt and Berg 2010, 339). Acknowledging my position allows others to understand how I am present in the
research, contributing to the rigor of the research without making claims of objectivity, as is standard among positivist researchers. Indeed, as Winchester and Rofe (2010, 16) point out, “researchers who define their own position in relation to their research might be more objective than their colleagues who point to the supposed objectivity of quantitative methods and fail to reveal the many subjective influences that shape both the research question and the explanations that they put forward.” Elucidating my positionality allows me instead to focus on how it leads to the creation of ‘situated knowledge’ (Mansvelt and Berg 2010, 338).

Winchester and Rofe (2010, 9) note, “the research questions will to some extent shape the methods that will be used,” particularly in regards to whether they aim to uncover the experiences and meanings of individuals or social structures. They go on to describe the gamut of methods that may best elucidate each type of knowledge, from autobiography as the extreme of individual experience to questionnaires as a means of understanding structural constraints. In the middle lies the semi-structured interview, able to uncover both structural impacts and individual experiences. For this thesis, aimed at revealing the effects of neoliberal political economic structures on individuals and organizations, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data-gathering method.

Semi-structured interviews differ from structured in that they allow participants to help guide the discussion, do not follow a strict order of questions, allow secondary or follow-up questions to be asked, and allow the researcher to customize interview questions to the respondent and ask spontaneous questions (Hay 2010). The benefits of
semi-structured interviews include the focus on open questions, which allow respondents to “formulate their own answers, unrestricted by having to choose between pre-determined categories” (Hay 2010, 381). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to remain open to relevant but unexpected topics and themes that respondents provide (Dunn 2010). I conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews, with questions and topics prepared in advance in an interview guide designed for each participant based on their role in the local food system and my pre-existing knowledge about them. This provided opportunity to adjust the order and wording of questions as the research progressed and “new information and experiences [were] fed back into the research design” (Dunn 2010, 105). Importantly, this interview style created space for issues to emerge that I may not have considered in advance, increasing the inductive nature of the study (Dunn 2010).

Data

Interview participants were purposefully selected through criterion sampling (Bradshaw and Stratford 2010): all participants are stakeholders in the Athens area local food system through their jobs as well as by being consumers of local food. In addition, all interview participants live and work primarily within Athens County. Participants were identified through the list of vendors on the Athens Farmers Market website, the websites of organizations and businesses, and via contacts made through my position as participant in the local food system, as described above. Effort was made to represent a variety of voices and opinions from people with a diverse range of roles in the local food system, while keeping the number of interviewees reasonable within the scope of a
master’s thesis. In order to respect the confidence of individual interview participants, they will not be described in detail. However, of the sixteen participants, four were farmers, four were owners or staff at local food businesses, one works for an agricultural extension agency, and seven work for local nonprofit organizations (Table 2). Three of the farmers interviewed currently focus entirely on produce, growing a variety of vegetables, herbs, and berries. The fourth farmer engages in produce as well as egg production. At least two of these farmers make use of season extension techniques to increase their production and profits. Of the food businesses represented, three are restaurants, and one is a company centered on producing products from locally grown grains and beans. All three restaurants are locally owned and prioritize the use of locally grown and produced foods and beverages, participating in the hyperlocal 30 Mile Meal project described in the introduction.
Table 2

*Interview Participants and Job Roles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Job Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Local produce and berry farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>Local organic produce farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Local produce and berry farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Local produce and egg farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Co-owner of business making products from locally-grown grains and beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>Co-owner of a local bakery and restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>Worker at a local restaurant and brewery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Worker-owner at a local restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>Staff at Community Food Initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Staff at Live Healthy Appalachia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Programs assistant at ACEnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Capacity and strategy developer at ACEnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>Staff of Rural Action’s Sustainable Agriculture program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Staff of Rural Action’s Sustainable Agriculture program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Former AmeriCorps at Rural Action’s Sustainable Agriculture program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>Agent at Ohio State University Extension in Athens County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names have been changed to protect the identities of interview participants.*

There are four nonprofits represented in the study (Table 3). The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) focuses on regional economic growth, primarily through supporting entrepreneurship. Community Food Initiatives works to increase the accessibility of healthy, locally grown food in Appalachia Ohio through a focus on community and school gardens, gardening and cooking workshops, and collecting food from local producers and distributing it to local food pantries. Live Healthy Appalachia is engaged in nutrition and cooking education for adults and children, with the goal of enabling people to make healthier food choices. Rural Action is an organization with multiple program areas, including one that focuses on promotion of sustainable agriculture in southeast Ohio, with a focus on expanding markets for local food producers, increasing access to local food in rural areas, and building the local
economy. In addition, all but Live Healthy Appalachia are engaged in the collaborative Appalachia Accessible Food Network, whose goal is increasing availability, affordability, and consumption of healthy local food.

Table 3

*Food-Related Nonprofits in the Athens Area and their Missions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonprofit</th>
<th>Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet)</td>
<td>“To grow the regional economy by supporting entrepreneurs and strengthening economic sectors”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Food Initiatives</td>
<td>“To support a local food movement that expands fair access to fresh and nutritious foods for all people in our region”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Healthy Appalachia</td>
<td>“To promote healthy eating and active living through educational opportunities and community partnerships”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Action</td>
<td>“To foster social, economic, and environmental justice in Appalachian Ohio”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: Organizational websites)

Of the sixteen interview participants, ten were women, six were men, and their ages ranged from mid-twenties through sixties. All participants live and work within the study area used for this project, a one-hundred-and-fifty mile radius around the city of Athens, based on the Athens Farmers Market’s definition of local (Athens Farmers Market). Additional stakeholders (farmers, food business owners, and government agency and nonprofit staff) were contacted via email and phone to request interviews but either did not respond or were unable to schedule a time to meet for an interview. The possibility of answering questions over email was provided to some of these individuals, but none followed through with this option. This may in part be because interviews were requested during the growing season, a busy time of year for farmers and other people
involved with food systems work. The research for this thesis proceeded in seven phases from fall 2015 through spring 2017, described in Table 4.

Table 4

Research Phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background research, writing and defending the thesis proposal, obtaining IRB approval</td>
<td>November 2015 to May 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Observing and networking with stakeholders, including participation in the local Food Policy Council and attending two conferences with stakeholders</td>
<td>February 2016 to August 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conducting interviews</td>
<td>July 2016 to October 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Transcribing interviews</td>
<td>October 2016 to January 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Coding and analysis</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Writing and editing</td>
<td>March 2017 to May 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Defending the thesis</td>
<td>June 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before conducting interviews, approval was obtained from the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in April 2017. Potential participants were then initially contacted via e-mail. They were informed about the manner in which their contact information was obtained, the purpose of the research, what their participation entailed, and how long the interview was expected to take. At the beginning of each interview, the informed consent of each participant was obtained through a document outlining any potential risks, their right to discontinue the interview at any time, and assurance of the confidentiality of their responses (see Appendix A). With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded in their entirety. When selecting the location where interviews took place, I followed Elwood and Martin’s (2000) advice that the ‘place’ of an interview may affect the power and positionality of participants, and that
when participants are offered a choice of interview location, they “may feel more empowered in their interaction with the researcher” (656). As such, all participants were asked to choose a location convenient to them. Half of the interviews were conducted in the participant’s workplace, either their office or the business at which they work or own, three at their homes, three at local coffee shops, and two at the public library. The semi-structured interviews for this research were conducted with the aid of interview schedules that were individualized to each participant. Sample interview questions can be found in Appendix B. They are aimed at understanding how participants perceive their role in the local food system, what they prioritize, what constraints they deal with, how they view food insecurity, how they try to meet need, and where they see possibilities for change. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided the opportunity to add any additional information that they wanted to share that had not already been discussed and encouraged to ask questions of the researcher. When all interviews were complete, they were transcribed in full.

In an effort to increase the trustworthiness of the results through triangulation, data were also gathered through observation at the Athens Farmers Market, the Chesterhill Produce Auction, two local food conferences, and meetings of the Food Policy Council, as well as analysis of documents and websites published by stakeholders. In May 2016, I attended the Local Food Council Summit and State Food Policy Summit at Ohio State University along with other members of the local Food Policy Council. In July 2016, I attended the Real Food Real Local Conference held in The Plains, Ohio that included sessions on food policy, aggregation and distribution of locally produced food,
economic development, and other topics of interest to local food system stakeholders. This conference was hosted by The Real Food Real Local Institute, which is operated primarily by staff from ACEnet. Attendance at both conferences and Food Policy Council meetings helped me build rapport with stakeholders and informal conversations contributed to an increased understanding of issues with which they deal, which helped with the continued development of salient interview questions. Documents gathered for this research include informational flyers and pamphlets distributed at the conferences, reports and documents shared with me by interview participants, and information freely available to the public that is posted on organizational and business websites. Data gathered from websites were especially useful for expanding the scope of the research, allowing me to include material from people and organizations with whom I was unable to schedule interviews. The decision to end data collection in October 2016 was based on reaching saturation, when “no new information or insights” were gathered (Cameron 2010, 159), as well as dealing with the time constraints necessary to finish this thesis in a timely fashion.

When all data were collected, a close reading of the interview transcripts and other documents was completed. The purpose of this first step of analysis is to review and reexamine all the data that has been collected, being open to emergent ideas and patterns (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Next, transcripts and documents underwent an analytical coding process, in which data were organized, evaluated, and categorized (Charmaz 2006, Cope 2010, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Coding took place in two stages: open coding and focused coding. In the initial step, open coding, all themes or
ideas identified were coded, with the purpose of broadening analytical possibilities and sticking close to the data (Charmaz 2006, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Transcripts and documents were open coded until saturation was reached and no new ideas emerged. At that point, open codes that were related were grouped together into themes that became the codes for focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Expected emergent themes included those related to food access, food security, market-based approaches, individual responsibility, and fostering economic growth. However, coding was not limited to these themes; in fact, the “strength of coding lies in its being open to new and unexpected connections, which can sometimes generate the most important insights” (Cope 2010, 283). After focused codes were established, they were brought together into a codebook and axially coded to sort the data into a coherent narrative through conceptual relationships (Charmaz 2006, Cope 2010). Next, all sixteen interview transcripts as well as documents containing the most relevant information were coded using the focused codes. After focused coding was complete, coding reports were produced that contained all text that had been coded with each focused code. When this step was complete, the data were prepared for synthesis in writing the results and discussion presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: Does the Local Food System in the Athens Area Exhibit Elements of Neoliberalism?

There are three overarching neoliberal themes exhibited in the Athens area local food system: a predominant market-based focus, a ‘retreat to charity’ that aims to promote economic growth, and a strong emphasis on the personal responsibility of consumers. These themes are indicative of the neoliberal shift of responsibility for well-being away from the state towards individuals and community groups and the belief that the market is the site where social issues are best addressed. Each of these themes creates its own set of constraints for local food system stakeholders and limits their ability to impact low-income food insecurity.

**Market Focus**

Neoliberal doctrine proposes that the solutions to society’s problems lie in increasing the “reach and frequency of market transactions” and bringing “all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey 2005, 3). In this theory, it is the market, not the state, which ensures the welfare of the people, releasing the state of its responsibility. Within the Athens area local food system, most work is framed as having both social and economic benefit. The goal is largely to build the local economy, create opportunities for entrepreneurship or employment, and support producers. The general belief among stakeholders is that with increased economic activity and job opportunities, social issues such as poverty and food insecurity will be addressed. Because the solutions to these social problems rely upon development of the local food economy through
market expansion, these activities fit the neoliberal ideal of market-based initiatives for addressing social issues. One reason that significant work is put into creating markets and increasing their capacity is to help even the playing field for local producers, who are often at a disadvantage due to government policies that benefit large-scale producers.

*Uneven Competition*

Several government policies benefit large-scale producers and contribute to uneven competition for producers in the Athens area local food system. The main way this occurs is through commodity crop subsidies, which are an example of the neoliberal state intervening to build market capacity for commodity crop farmers. Sam, a Rural Action staff member, described these subsidies as “driv[ing] the food system in an awkward way” because so much funding goes towards them, while “the rest is pretty much underserved.” They noted that specialty crops and rural development each only receive “like half of a percent in the Farm Bill… So that drives commodity agriculture to be the big one.” Leigh, a local food business owner, echoed this inequity between commodity and specialty crops, citing a 2007 USDA report:

> There was a bar chart that showed that grain, beans, and oil seed accounted for $80 billion in revenue and the largest acreage. And let’s kind of compare that because that doesn’t mean anything; who knows what 80 billion means? But we can compare it to that same year: vegetables were 12 billion, and everything else was lower. Some things were 8 billion, or whatever. So here’s the biggest piece of agriculture. Do they care about us eating local kale? No, they don’t, because they’re already making a lot of money and they will continue to.

The Appalachia Accessible Food Network has identified the need for policy change that benefits small-scale and specialty crop producers. The goals listed in their theory of change document include “Policy supports regional specialty crop production,” and,
Policies support beginning farmers through availability of capital, wide spread [sic] and easily accessible farmer training programs, farmer mentoring programs and FFA and 4h [sic] programs that focus on health food production for sale and for consumption.

Another way that the competition between corporate and local food producers may be affected is through recently passed legislation that changed food safety standards for farmers markets. Alex from the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) described how a new regulation would require farmers market vendors selling cheese, meat, or eggs to use mechanized refrigeration beginning in March 2017. Local farmer Kris expressed a belief that this regulation is an “attempt of corporate structures to totally eliminate farmers markets” by making things difficult and expensive for small-scale producers. At the Athens Farmers Market, this regulation requires additional investment by vendors, which another local farmer, Tony, predicted would lead to increased food prices.

Government policy currently not only benefits actors in the corporate food system, it can also constrain small farmers from competing with bigger producers. Kris, a local farmer, described how government policy constrains their ability to compete with large producers, especially Amish cooperatives, to whom government policy is differentially applied:

Now you’re competing with an Amish co-op who doesn’t have nearly the costs that we as English [the term used by Amish people to describe those who are not Amish] have. They don’t have to pay employment taxes, they don’t have to pay Social Security, they don’t have… I mean there’s all of these things that they don’t have to pay, and so what if they pay somebody to drive all their stuff there? That’s miniscule compared to the cost of having people and giving people jobs. So it’s not a really easy, simple equation, it’s really complex.
However, these Amish producers may also be considered part of local food systems. In fact, at the Chesterhill Produce Auction, a key local food outlet in the Athens area local food system, most sellers are Amish. In this case, government policy is more of a benefit for some local food system stakeholders than others.

Not only do actors within the local food system struggle to compete with large-scale producers, they are also competing against each other, perhaps even more so than against the globalized corporate food system, as pointed out by Sam from Rural Action:

As small farmers… they’re not competing against the global food system. They’re competing against other… they’re just in a farmers market. They’re either accepting a niche and not competing with anybody, or they feel like they are in more competition. Most small farmers, local farmers around here they feel like they’re competing… A new farmer comes along, it’s like, ‘Oh boy, new competition.’ So how do we move from niche acceptance, and a boutique mindset, to really staking out a plan to access a percentage of the global food system market?

Expanding on this, local farmer Kris described that when new farmers come along, they “only know one way to break into the market, and that’s to undercut prices. And so the competition’s really fierce.” They continued by saying that they do not mind the competition, just the undercutting of prices. Kris attributed the ability of other farmers to charge low prices to having off-farm sources of income.

Although the government regulations and subsidies described above may not seem to adhere to neoliberal theory as they tamper with the market, it is important to remember that ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ is often different from neoliberal theory (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002). Despite these divergences from neoliberal theory, the idea that market-based approaches will lead to social good remains
widespread (Lapavitsas 2005). Faced with this uneven playing field, actors in the Athens area local food system work to build the market capacity for local food.

*Enhancing Local Food Markets for Economic Benefit*

Market development is a predominant aspect of local food systems work in the Athens area, reflecting dominant neoliberal ideals that promote markets as the means of addressing social need. This market development and capacity building is done in order to support producers with the hope of creating economic impact that will lead to improvements of the socioeconomic and food security status of low-income people. A focus on economic benefits local food systems is common among stakeholders. When interview participants were asked what they consider the benefits of a local food system to be, more than half cited economic benefits. Jessie, a Live Healthy Appalachia staff member, described their view in the following way:

> I think one of the biggest benefits of a local food system is the ability to have positive economic development happening here. We’re in Appalachia, we’re in Athens County. No, we don’t have the kind of industry that other towns or cities might have and sometimes when we do have industry, it’s not necessarily beneficial to everyone in the community: resource extraction, things like that. So I think the economic benefits are pretty clear... For us, for Live Healthy, we obviously want people to have more access to fresh foods that are grown locally, so that’s an added benefit, but I think honestly that the economic piece is the big piece.

Others echoed this emphasis on the need for economic development in the area, particularly because of its history as an area with resource extraction and impoverishment within Appalachia. Mel from Rural Action noted that agriculture is a good way to build the local economy “because it is something that’s not transitional, it’s going to go on forever; it’s something that’s not extractive, like the coal mining and then the fracking.”
Mel also expressed a belief that the local food system has the ability to be transformative for the region: “By purchasing local, you have the potential to transform the region’s status.” In an effort to support regional economic development, some stakeholders have reframed the conversation about local food to place more emphasis on the potential economic benefits. Taylor, a former AmeriCorps member at Rural Action, noted that they tried to change the dialogue around local food to focus on “creating economic impact.”

We were trying to push people to buy, not local, but to buy where it was creating economic impact. So trying to shift the conversation from local, which could mean the wealthy farmer down the street, to buying somewhere like [the Chesterhill Produce Auction] where it’s going to create a huge economic footprint in that area if you’re buying something.

The economic impacts of this type of purchasing may be measurable: Jordan, an ACEnet staff member, noted that the produce auction has enabled $2 million to go through the rural county in which it is located since 2009.

A similar economic benefit of local food about which stakeholders frequently commented is the ability to keep your dollars local and invest in the community. Alex, an ACEnet staff member, described why this is a value to them:

One thing I really like about Athens is you see the full circle of your dollar, especially at farmers markets or things like that. I feel good about buying food from a local business because I’ve seen them purchase at the farmers market, and I pick up occasional work for farmers at the farmers market and then it’s like my money’s going back into my pocket. So you can really see full circle, and I think that that’s really cool to keep your money here… I like to see where my money goes, and I like to know that it’s supporting local jobs and keeping people within this community.

The ability to know where your money goes and whom you are supporting was frequently mentioned as a benefit of local food systems. Pat, an agricultural extension agent, explained that local farmers might benefit from increased consumer knowledge
about the source of food and how it was produced, as this may lead to a willingness to pay more for local food. Taylor from Rural Action reiterated this point, stating, “I think when people say local that’s what they mean, they want it to make an impact, or they want to know where their food comes from.”

In addition to the economic benefits for producers in the local food system, stakeholders link local economic development to increased access to food for low-income consumers. The theory of change document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network states their major goal in the following way:

A local food economy exists that increases availability of, access to, and consumption of healthy food for all consumers, especially low income and vulnerable populations in Athens County and the region.

The document defines healthy food as local, nutritionally dense, and “food that creates a healthier economy and greater resilience and food security in our communities.” The combined focus on economic development and increasing access to local reflects the neoliberal emphasis on addressing social need through markets. A key way that stakeholders support the market-based system is through a focus on supporting producers and increasing the supply of local food.

*Focus on Increasing Supply of Local Food*

The focus on increasing the supply of local food is indicative of the neoliberal, supply-side approach, which emphasizes the needs of producers (Alkon and Mares 2012). One benefit of increased supply is the hope that it will lead to lower prices, making local food more accessible to low-income consumers. This is reflected in one of the goals from the theory of change document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network:
“Supply of fresh, healthy, and local foods increases to a point that improves affordability for consumers.” Most stakeholders interviewed agreed with the need for boosting supply, emphasizing that demand for local food currently exceeds the available supply. Jamie, a worker at a restaurant that prioritizes buying local food, noted that they have to supplement several products such as cheese and onions with products sourced several states away or from across the country because local suppliers are unable to meet their demand. Alex from ACEnet said that they have heard several chefs and business owners express a desire to purchase more local food if it were available. Several farmers echoed this sentiment, noting that they do not think they are able to satiate current demand. Local farmer Tony stated, “I’m not too worried about flooding the market or anything like that, because everything I grow I can get rid of, that’s not a problem. Everybody wants me to grow more.” The focus on increasing supply is buttressed by an emphasis on supporting entrepreneurs and increasing employment opportunities within the local food system.

**Entrepreneurialism and the Enhancement of the Labor Market**

As a key market principle, entrepreneurialism is an important focus under neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). Food scholars have noted that in the neoliberal paradigm, the “collective oppositional politics of social justice” of the past are replaced by programs focused on the creation of entrepreneurial opportunity for local economic gain (Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman 2014, 137). Nationwide, much of this work is done by nonprofit organizations, and Allen *et al* (2003) note that for many of these organizations, it is easier to find funding to support entrepreneurialism than to support policy work or other initiatives. With funding a constant struggle, it is no surprise that Athens area
nonprofits focus on entrepreneurialism. However, supporting entrepreneurs is not only a focus of nonprofits; as Jo, a local restaurant owner, noted, “We’re always wanting other small food businesses to succeed. So I think we’re a good starting point before they think, ‘Oh I have to get my product ready for national markets.’ They could start here.”

In the Athens area, support for entrepreneurs occurs in several ways, including technical, financial, and marketing assistance. Technical assistance includes helping “businesses to think about what restaurants would want to buy your product, what licenses do you need if you’re having this kind of business and you want to sell to the farmers market or you want to sell to grocery stores, or you want to sell at restaurants” (Alex from ACEnet). Rural Action provides technical assistance through food safety education, good agricultural practice training, and season extension workshops in order to “do things for growers to increase production and profitability” (Sam from Rural Action).

Financial assistance for local businesses includes ACEnet’s financial management workshops, designed “to help small businesses grow or better understand their operations and markets” (Alex from ACEnet). Alex also pointed out that they try to focus on helping low-income people become entrepreneurs by facilitating their access to necessary resources that they might not be able to find through traditional routes, and until recently, ACEnet offered small loans to start-up businesses. In addition, ACEnet provides marketing assistance, including social media training and promotion. Rob, a local farmer, noted that when they started their egg business, “ACEnet was really beneficial in the marketing aspect of it.” In fact, nearly everything that ACEnet does revolves around increasing entrepreneurialism in the region. According to its website, ACEnet meets its
mission “by partnering with regional microenterprise and development practitioners to create a healthy local economy, allowing opportunity for all residents to start businesses, obtain quality jobs, and connect with other entrepreneurs for mutual benefit.”

Another way that entrepreneurialism is featured in the Athens area local food system is through the development of social enterprises by nonprofit organizations. Social enterprises are small businesses connected to the nonprofits that are set up to generate both social and financial return on investments (Campbell 2016). Social enterprises in the Athens area include Community Food Initiatives’ Ridge & Hollow Seed Alliance, the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) food ventures shared-use kitchen, and the Chesterhill Produce Auction. The Ridge & Hollow Seed Alliance buys open-pollinated seeds from local seed savers and sells them at retail locations around Athens. On their website, Community Food Initiatives describes the seed company as “a social enterprise – a business that supports participating growers while also supporting our organization.” ACEnet owns a shared-use kitchen and food storage spaces that they rent to tenants to generate revenue, while also fostering entrepreneurship and helping businesses increase their market capacity. Rural Action has a Social Enterprise division, which operates two social enterprises and encourages the development of more in the region. In an April 2017 Facebook post promoting the Appalachian Conference on Social Enterprise, Rural Action described the perceived benefits of such enterprise: “Social enterprises create jobs, build up communities, and protect our natural resources.” While social enterprises are cast positively, the market elements on which they are founded reflect neoliberal ideals within the local food system.
A document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network makes a direct connection between increased employment opportunities and decreased food insecurity:

We believe there is a link between food access and job creation in the agricultural and food sectors and we can envision a time when the food security needs of the region are part of solving the joblessness, under-employment and poverty issues creating food insecurity.

Local restaurant owner Jo reiterated the need for meaningful jobs and their belief that such jobs can be found through development of the local food system.

Local food businesses provide more local jobs that provide meaningful work for people here. It may not be the most highly paid work, a lot of farm work is barely profitable, and a lot of restaurant work has a tiny margin of profit, if any. But I feel like most people work not only for an income but to have some sense of meaning or like they’re accomplishing something.

They continued to describe the social and psychological benefits that accompany the economic benefits when people are happy with their jobs and contributing to the community. Understanding the focus on business support, entrepreneurialism, and job creation, it is perhaps no surprise that a significant amount of the food systems work done in the Athens area revolves around providing infrastructure for local food markets.

Providing Infrastructure to Support Local Food Markets

Nonprofit organizations in the Athens area are currently providing significant infrastructure to allow the local food system to expand. Through a collaboration with the Appalachian Regional Commission, Rural Action identified the need for “some kind of an aggregation point where small farmers bring stuff together to serve. Because when you look at the sustainable agriculture movement, the first victory at the first rung of success with that is direct marketing, farmers markets, etc. But the next piece would be local
wholesale” (Sam from Rural Action). This need is being met in part by Rural Action and ACEnet, who provide physical infrastructure that includes a shared-use kitchen and food storage space, facilitating farm-to-institution programs, and providing aggregation points for local food producers.

Regarding physical infrastructure, Alex from ACEnet explained, “we provide the infrastructure for them to process that food, and we provide business assistance or access to markets.” ACEnet’s shared-use kitchen includes thermal processing and labeling equipment as well as freezers, coolers, and storage space for farmers and food businesses. Alex also pointed out that this infrastructure exists to “provide a space for small businesses to get started without these huge overhead costs if they were setting up their own facilities or buying all the licenses themselves.” In addition, these organizations provide infrastructure for the aggregation and distribution of locally produced food, with a focus on increasing wholesale markets for local producers.

For many stakeholders, it is a given that nonprofits will provide local food system infrastructure. In fact, the theory of change document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network, which describes goals in the present tense even if they have not yet been achieved, assumes that such a system should and will continue:

The partners design and implement a collaborative food hub infrastructure, distribution and market channel network to leverage availability, affordability and consumption of local, fresh food… Connectivity between infrastructure is strong. Food hubs or other distribution networks are coordinated for efficient and equitable distribution. Public and private infrastructure work together to create a more robust system of storage and distribution.

A prime example of how nonprofits are creating infrastructure to support local food markets is found in the case of the Chesterhill Produce Auction, a social enterprise
and market-based food aggregation point operated by Rural Action. The auction creates economic impact, with about a quarter of a million dollars funneled through it each year, in a location with little other economic activity. From my observations at the auction, there were a fair number of rural residents attending the market. Yet these individual consumers do not constitute a sufficient customer base to keep the auction afloat; the auction requires bigger buyers, such as local businesses. However, the auction is located approximately twenty miles from the City of Athens and it is difficult to get a sufficient number of customers there every week. Sam from Rural Action noted that they have to do a lot of work to keep the auction going.

To get the auction to survive and to get customers, we have to do all kinds of stuff. We’re trying to drive the market, so we’ll take bids. We do this whole thing where we send out emails, it’s not very sustainable, but yeah. In other words, people won’t go there enough, so we have to do every trick we can to get business. One thing produce auctions will do is an order buyer. But we’re so small, we’re not a real order buyer, we’re just doing a legal thing called a proxy bid. So somebody gives me a bid or somebody a bid and then we submit it.

Rural Action staff places proxy bids for restaurants and businesses in the area and then delivers the produce to them. Through the produce auction and this proxy bid and delivery system, Rural Action is providing significant physical and support infrastructure to allow the local food system to thrive, while also allowing maintaining a market for local food. Sam also mentioned that this system is not very sustainable because it is heavily subsidized by grants. If the grant funding were to dry up, this vital element of the local food system might no longer be able to exist.

In addition to providing physical infrastructure, nonprofits provide support infrastructure to the local food system in several ways. One example of this is through
networking opportunities. Mel from Rural Action noted that, “a large part of what I do is networking with people to help connect growers and producers with buyers, restaurants, institutions, and/or individuals.” They continued by saying that they try to focus this work locally since “only maybe five percent of the people in Athens are really focused on buying local. Why don’t we convert them and build our system before we start reaching out there [to surrounding counties] and spending more money trying to get it out there and really not helping build the capacity locally?” Similarly, Jessie from Live Healthy Appalachia considers their role to be advocating “for larger systems that we work within to purchase locally,” and supporting the growth of the farm-to-school movement locally. Rural Action spearheads the farm-to-school movement in the Athens area as part of what stakeholders call ‘demand networks.’

‘Demand Networks’ Create Market Access for Local Producers

Nonprofits in the Athens area are engaged in work to grow what they have identified as ‘demand networks.’ The collaborative Appalachia Accessible Food Network, including staff from Rural Action, ACEnet, and Community Food Initiatives, is a key player in these demand networks, which are depicted as a way to drive markets, with the overall goal of increasing healthy food access. Jordan from ACEnet described the purpose of these networks: “[The Appalachia Accessible Food Network] came out with an action plan that would span over two years’ time with the overall goal of distributing 250,000 pounds of locally-sourced foods to these three demand networks.” Although the term ‘demand networks’ is used to describe these projects, they have little to do with directly increasing demand for local food by, for example, increasing
consumer desire for or ability to purchase local food. In fact, these networks are more directly focused on supporting producers and increasing the supply, distribution, and market opportunities for locally produced food. The networks consist of Country Fresh Stops, a farm-to-school program, and the Donation Station.

Operated by Rural Action, Country Fresh Stops is a program that facilitates the distribution of local produce to existing retail locations such as carryouts in rural towns as well as pop-up markets. Sam, a Rural Action staff member, described this program as “a food desert remediation project.” According to a document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network, Rural Action is involved with “aggregating produce from multiple growers and creating the capacity to stock” the Country Fresh Stops, as well as working with owners of the retail locations, marketing the food, and delivering the produce. Through the Country Fresh Stop program, Rural Action is creating a market for local food in rural areas.

The farm-to-school program is possible because Rural Action provides infrastructure that serves as an aggregation point for local produce, and partners with other local entities, such as ACEnet and Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio, to process and store food for schools. By providing the infrastructural support to allow this program to continue, Rural Action and its partners are fostering the development of a market for local food in schools. However, one aspect of the farm-to-school program may involve actual work to increase demand. The Appalachia Accessible Food Network considers the school gardens and community education programming done by Community Food Initiatives to be part of the farm-to-school program. Alex from ACEnet explained that
these programs are considered to “drive the demand, because they’re doing the education piece, which is helping more people know about the farmers markets.” Although education about local food may increase demand for it, the farm-to-school program serves mostly to create additional markets for local food.

The third demand network is Community Food Initiatives’ Donation Station, a program that distributes food that is donated or purchased from local producers to food pantries, free meal locations, and other social service agencies. While the Donation Station does facilitate the consumption of local food by low-income people, it does not increase their ability to purchase local food and drive demand. However, local producers benefit from the Donation Station because monetary donations are used to purchase food from them. In 2015, the Donation Station purchased $14,559 worth of food from local producers. The Donation Station is yet another example of nonprofits working to support producers. The Donation Station also contributes to the ‘retreat to charity’ within the Athens area local food system.

Retreat to Charity for Economic Growth

Poppendieck (1998) uses the term ‘retreat to charity’ to describe the shift of responsibility for ensuring food security from the state to nonprofit and charitable organizations as entitlement programs are cut in the neoliberal era. As these organizations step up to take responsibility for that which used to belong to the state, they reinforce the idea that it is their role, not the state’s, to deliver these services (Alkon and Mares 2012). Although charitable organizations such as food pantries and free meal sites are present in the Athens area, they have little to do with the local food system beyond the local food
provided to them by the Donation Station. Although the Donation Station appears to be about charitable giving to address food insecurity, it is more about expanding markets than an actual retreat to charity.

The Donation Station

In Athens County, there are approximately thirteen food pantries and twenty-two churches and charitable organizations that offer free meals to low-income community members (Athens County JFS 2015, United Appeal 2015, United Appeal 2017). These food pantries and free meal locations are supported by the work of Community Food Initiatives’ Donation Station, which “receives both food and monetary donations each week at local farmers markets and produce auctions from customers, vendors, and local community gardeners. The monetary donations are used to purchase fresh foods from the market and auction vendors” (Community Food Initiatives website, emphasis in original). Food is then distributed to over forty food pantries, free meal locations, and social service agencies in the tri-county area, supplementing their supplies of nonperishable foods.

According to the Appalachia Accessible Food Network, in 2015, the Donation Station distributed 86,991 pounds of food. Importantly, however, the Donation Station does not focus only on providing fresh produce to low-income people; it is also designed to drive the local food economy. Tracy from Community Food Initiatives described the goals of the program in the following way:

[The Donation Station is] designed in a way that is not, we hope, just palliative. We don’t just want to be getting food and giving food out perpetually, forever and ever, just because people are giving us some money. We want to be an economic driver within the local food system. That’s why we collect those financial donations and then invest them directly back into the food system. So that we can say we spent over $14,000 at the farmers market and produce auction last year…
Hopefully that’s helping build up some of our farms and they can hire more people.

The Community Food Initiatives website reiterates this focus on driving the economy, describing the Donation Station as “A local food solution that fights hunger and supports the local food economy.” This joint focus on economic and social benefits reflects the neoliberal ideal of addressing social justice issues through expansion of the market, where individual freedom is guaranteed, and “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 2005, 65). In addition, the focus on supporting producers is an example of the Donation Station working to expand local food markets.

The Donation Station’s focus on supporting producers and expanding the local economy limits its ability to address food insecurity directly. There may, however, be indirect ways in which the Donation Station contributes to increasing food security. For example, by supporting producers and being an ‘economic driver’ the Donation Station may support an increased supply of local food, which may lead overtime to lower prices, making local food more financially accessible for low-income people. Nevertheless, the Donation Station currently has a limited direct link to increasing food security and as a result, despite a desire to be more than ‘palliative,’ it remains so. Charitable means of addressing food insecurity, such as that used by the Donation Station, do not increase purchasing power, address the root causes of food insecurity, such as poverty, or provide guaranteed access to food. Some stakeholders are aware of this, including Alex from ACEnet, who noted that strategies beyond the charity model should be used to address food insecurity.
I feel like a lot of the ways that you feel food security being dealt with is what people would say a ‘Band-Aid.’ So food donation programs, which I think that’s filling an immediate need, which is great, but for me, personally, I would rather be working to think more strategically and more long-term about how we can build up populations and empower people to get jobs… I wouldn’t personally want to be working to just hand out food to people, because I think there’s other strategies. And it’s great that people are doing that now, but there’s other ways to think about it, too.

Although the retreat to charity is somewhat present in the Athens area via charitable organizations that provide food to food-insecure people, nonprofits and other stakeholders in the Athens area local food system are more focused on expanding markets and promoting the personal responsibility of consumers for their own well-being. This has become a preferred method for addressing food insecurity under neoliberalism.

**Personal Responsibility of Consumers**

An emphasis on the personal responsibility of consumers is common among stakeholders in the Athens area local food system. In neoliberal frameworks, personal responsibility “is substituted for social protections… that were formerly an obligation of employers and the state” (Harvey 2005, 168). Additionally, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 2005, 65). The idea that individuals are responsible for their own well-being is pervasive and contributes to the creation of ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ (Alkon and Mares 2012). The focus on personal responsibility in the Athens area reinforces the idea that the market is the appropriate space for social change and that it can be achieved through individual acts of consumption. While personal responsibility may be construed as a form of “citizen empowerment,” this “reinforces the notion that individuals and community groups are responsible for addressing problems that were not of their own making” (Alkon and
Mares 2012, 349). In the Athens area, the emphasis on personal responsibility is evident through focuses on both consumer education and self-sufficiency.

**Consumer Education**

A significant amount of work done by nonprofit organizations in the Athens area is focused on education to produce knowledgeable consumers that will make healthier choices. Allen *et al* (2003, 71) describes this type of consumer education:

>This is education for personal change: helping individuals recognize that they have power as consumers to grow some of their own food, purchase food directly from local farmers, develop a healthier diet, and choose foods that are tied to the biological rhythm of their locale.

While education can be used to empower people and has many positive benefits, when done in this context, it reinforces the neoliberal ideal of personal responsibility for well-being, creating neoliberal subjects and ignoring structural issues that affect individual well-being. In addition, consumer education is designed to foster consumption, not citizenship, thereby limiting the types of action with which people may feel empowered to engage. In sum, these approaches avoid addressing systemic problems, focusing instead on changing individual actions.

One example of the focus on consumer education is Rural Action’s Healthy Home Consumer Guide, which “provides storage, selection, and simple cooking techniques for many local produce items that are locally available” (Rural Action 2015). Staff member Sam described the guide in the following way:

>“This is something we made for a home consumer who didn’t grow up with produce. So this is like marketing to people who have no clue what would you do with asparagus. I mean, when you come right down to it, most people know about three or four vegetables. So this is basics of more.”
Among stakeholders, the general perception is that when low-income people, who have limited physical or financial access to healthy foods, are able to obtain these foods, they lack the knowledge or skills to be able to prepare them. The solution presented to this knowledge gap is education that encourages consumers to make better choices in order to take their health into their own hands. However, this casts the individual as responsible for their own well-being and places them in charge of their own adjustment, which may ignore complicating structural issues such as generational poverty, which education alone is not capable of addressing.

Much of the educational programming done by local nonprofits is focused on children and takes place in schools. Live Healthy Appalachia does weekly education in second-grade classrooms throughout Athens County and in some surrounding counties, reaching about eight hundred students per week. The curriculum focuses on teaching kids about healthy food, introducing them to new foods, and helping them develop basic cooking skills. Another school-based education program is SNAP-Ed, a federally funded USDA program that “teaches people using or eligible for SNAP about good nutrition and how to make their food dollars stretch further” (USDA 2016c). The agriculture extension agency operates SNAP-Ed, which takes place in schools where at least fifty percent of students receive free or reduced lunches as well as in locations in local communities.

Many local schools also have gardens where students receive additional food and nutrition education. Community Food Initiatives facilitates many of these gardens, providing resources and technical support to the schools. Tracy, a staff member of
Community Food Initiatives, noted that they are working to develop curriculum related to these gardens:

Certainly there’s education going on, but it might not necessarily come from a lesson plan that’s tied to testing standards. But we’re working on that. We’re hoping to develop pre-K through 12 lesson plans that meet testing standards across the board… There are no unified school garden program lesson plans that meet testing standards in our state. So, we want to start paving the way at least.

The focus on educating children expands beyond nonprofit organizations. Leigh, a local food business owner, described their desire to be involved with classroom education, working together with other organizations and helping with education on grains and beans, the company’s specialty. Jamie, who works at a local restaurant that regularly donates money to local nonprofits, emphasized that they like to give to organizations doing food and nutrition education work in schools because they are the types of programs that “help to change the at-large systems and beliefs.” The focus on educating children is frequently cast as the way to create generational, large-scale change. Local restaurant owner Jo noted that when kids are exposed to healthy food in schools their families benefit, too.

Then that goes home to the families, and people learn from their kids. When your kid is learning in school, you get to learn some of that stuff, too. It really does rub off. And the kids start asking for these fresh things when they go to the store with their family.

Food and nutrition education in the Athens area is not, however, limited to children. Several nonprofit education programs are also aimed at adults.

Similar to children’s programs, most adult education programs are focused on exposing people to new foods and teaching them basic cooking skills, with the goal being that people will know how to use healthy local foods when they have access to them, so
the foods are not wasted. Tony, a local farmer, described the perceived need for these types of programs in the following way:

And as you and most people know, there is a huge demand for the low-income to have good quality food. They have access to it to a certain degree, but then they don’t. They have to re-learn, to be taught how to prepare it. And how to eat it and when… I mean, there’s a lot to learn when it comes to produce. Most people don’t know, they just don’t go out there and Google it and find out.

Both Live Healthy Appalachia and Community Food Initiatives hold classes and workshops to teach adults these skills, and both organizations link the ability to prepare healthy food with increased food security. Jessie, a Live Healthy Appalachia staff member, described how their educational programming also supports the efforts of organizations working to increase healthy food access:

A lot of what we do, we’re hoping for big system change, right? But we’re doing it by giving individuals knowledge and tools and skills… It’s really about instruction and trying to improve people’s comfort and knowledge of food. We have really incredible organizations who are working really specifically on food access issues… we want to be able to support that by maybe familiarizing them with those foods before they come home… I think that’s our part is creating a level of familiarity not only with just physically the foods but also how to prepare them so that when these other organizations, that are really boots on the ground in that setting, come in, they can be more successful.

Educational opportunities expand beyond programming. The purpose statement on the website of the Athens Farmers Market includes that its role is to “serve its members and the public through education on the benefits to the community that result from supporting a locally based food economy and by providing a public market allowing direct connections between producers and consumers of local food and agricultural products.” Alex, an ACEnet staff member, echoed the educational opportunities available through the farmers market:
I’ve learned an incredible amount about food and how to grow food and how to prepare food from people who live here. I think the farmers market itself is an educational opportunity. People constantly ask me when I’m selling vegetables there for [a local farm] what to do with their vegetables and we talk about how to cook them. Organizations are getting grant funding to do this education but it’s also happening every time there’s a farmers market and people asking the farmers what to do with their vegetables.

As stakeholders work to address the perceived lack of knowledge about healthy local food, they recognize that education can happen in many places and ways.

In large part, the focus on food and nutrition education in the Athens area is not limited to increasing comfort with and knowledge of how to prepare healthy, locally grown food, it is also about changing people’s behaviors. This is further reflects the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility for well-being, which focuses on changing individual actions. Shopping habits are one type of behavior that interview participants concentrated on, particularly for low-income consumers. Mel, a Rural Action staff member, described the behaviors of consumers at a carryout store in the area. According to someone who works at the carryout: “It’s the people that are paying cash, she said, that are buying the fresh produce. And the ones that are on food stamps are still gravitating to the prefab foods, the box of macaroni and cheese. So, it needs more education.” Live Healthy Appalachia includes grocery store tours as a part of their adult educational programming to help people know how to find and choose healthy foods at the store.

Stakeholders believe that getting people to choose healthy foods requires changing their perceptions about food. Jessie from Live Healthy Appalachia described this challenge, reiterating the need for educational programs to reach children: “I think what we found is, and this isn’t surprising, but it can be really hard to change a lifetime of
habits and feelings about certain foods and if we can get in there early enough and at least plant the seed.” Jessie also described how they work with people’s perceptions of healthy food, drawing a link between food security and comfort with healthy food:

I think a lot of times we do fight against [negative perceptions of healthy food] because, whether it’s through having your EBT card [Electronic Benefit Transfer card, used to redeem SNAP benefits at retail locations] accepted at a farmers market or getting food from the Donaton Station, if you think something is gross, and you’re hungry, sometimes you still won’t eat that thing because its ‘gross’… A lot of times for us, I feel like that’s kind of the hump that we have to get over because I do think it can still be a really difficult experience for someone to eat something that’s really unfamiliar or that they just feel like they don’t like because they haven’t maybe had it in the right way. I think that’s a big part of it. I know it seems weird, because if someone’s hungry or if they’re food insecure, food is food. But sometimes it’s not… I think food security is also having knowledge and comfort and want to prepare healthy foods.

This focus on consumer food and nutrition education to help people make better food choices, improve the health of the local population, and drive demand for local food may be seen as examples of the neoliberal focus on personal responsibility for well-being.

Within the Athens area, the focus on the personal responsibility of consumers extends beyond education and behavioral change for personal health and food security. Many stakeholders also focus on the personal responsibility of consumers to create positive change based on how they spend their money. As Rob, a local farmer put it, “You vote with your dollars.” Alex, an ACEnet staff member, discussed the power they see in this approach:

I think bigger picture-wise that continuing to increase consumer awareness nationally about asking where your food comes from. And where your food comes from is going to affect everyone. I think the consumers probably have to be one of the bigger catalysts for change, especially within this industry, because these businesses respond to where the dollars are. And if the dollars are in the consumers’ pockets, they’re going to change based on consumer behavior. Even McDonald’s is changing some of its purchasing habits and thinking about
different ways to source food is saying a lot to what’s happening nationally. And I think that’s because of consumer interest.

This approach represents what Michael Pollan (2006) calls the ‘market-as-movement.’ This neoliberal approach is problematic because it frames individual consumption rather than collective action as the site of political activism (Guthman 2008). In addition to the focus on the personal responsibility of consumers, stakeholders in the Athens area local food system also emphasize self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is related to personal responsibility as it is based on the idea of individuals being responsible for taking care of their own needs.

Self-Sufficiency

Within the neoliberal framework, self-sufficiency is indicative of “the reduced role of the state in its support of social and cultural activity” with investments focused instead on creating the capacity for self-sufficiency among individuals (Changfoot 2007, 132). During the current era of ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism, nonprofits have organized around the principle of self-sufficiency and self-improvement in place of state-sponsored policy (Peck and Tickell 2002, Pudup 2008). A major focus of the self-sufficiency activities in the Athens area is on encouraging people to grow their own food, particularly as a means of addressing food insecurity. Community Food Initiatives runs a community garden program with five gardens in Athens and surrounding towns. The gardens are supplemented by a series of gardening and food preservation workshops. The organization’s website describes the motivation for this programming: “by sharing the knowledge to grow and prepare fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains and wholesome foods, people become prepared to feed their families, improve their health
and their community.” This statement reveals the connection between self-sufficiency and the shift of responsibility for personal and community well-being from the state to the individual. Interestingly, Tracy, a Community Food Initiatives staff member, mentioned that the organization’s mission statement used to talk about self-sufficiency, but they changed it because “none of our programs are actually helping anyone become self-sufficient. As well as, self-sufficiency doesn’t have to do with community; those words don’t make sense together.” Yet some would argue that the community garden program does reflect a continued focus on self-sufficiency. As Pudup (2008, 1228) notes, community gardens are “projects specifically designed as spaces of neoliberal governmentality, that is, spaces in which gardening puts individuals in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help.” This contributes to the transition of individuals into neoliberal subjects, and, as self-sufficiency often requires the development of new knowledge and skills, it works hand-in-hand with the focus on consumer education, described above.

Nonprofits are not alone in their focus on increasing self-sufficiency by encouraging people to grow their own food. Some farmers also expressed that more people should be engaged in gardening and providing food for themselves. Farmers also described how they have taken responsibility for their own food security by growing fruits and vegetables, raising animals, hunting, and preserving food. When asked about local low-income food insecurity issues, most farmers interviewed provided responses that focused on self-sufficiency and increasing food security at a household level to be able to withstand disasters such as terrorist attacks or the power grid going down:
Food security in the true sense is you’re able to kill it; you’re able to go get food when nothing else is working. If the electricity went out on a major scale… It happens! Who’s to say that what’s happening over there [in Syria] is not going to affect us. All the terrorism and all that stuff, its affecting us all. You’re not going to have food security at Kroger. You can’t, because it’s only got a three days’ supply or something… If I can’t walk to it in a day and carry it back, it seems kind of crazy. What if we don’t have electricity? It’s water, food, shelter, and fire, but electricity is not on that list. It really is not that necessary. And it’s also very dependent… on all this fuel and stuff to keep that. So anything that you can do for yourself that doesn’t depend on oil would be helpful if something happened. Maybe it’s just a week, holy crap! That’s hard enough on people if you can’t even get water for a week or if you can’t get food for a week or something like that. I’ve always got food and we’re not on the grid for heat… I think that’s food security, having enough food even if the power grid goes down for some reason.

(Jackie, a local farmer)

Jackie also described food security in terms of having sufficient supplies of crops such as potatoes, garlic, beans, and other foods that do not require electricity for storage. When considering what might prevent people from being able to grow their own food, Rob, another farmer, responded that education was needed:

It used to be poor people grew their own gardens and being poor was not a bad connotation because people worked and were honest but we have evolved to the point where you talk to people now and they will say, “Oh, I can’t afford to grow a garden.” I don’t know if that’s brainwashing from the media or what, because food’s so cheap… With a little education, you can raise a surplus and you can grow a ten by twenty garden and raise all the food you need if you know intensive techniques.

The idea that low-income people lack the will or knowledge to take their food security into their own hands appears to be prevalent, further linking the focus on self-sufficiency with the perceived need for education and behavioral change.

Ideas about self-sufficiency in the Athens area local food system expand beyond the individual or family unit. Being in Appalachia provides a shared identity for many
people in the region, whether or not they are originally from the area, and this contributes to a desire for a sense of self-sufficiency at the community level:

Athens has a unique style and community. The foundation already exists for true resilience and sustainability, due to Athens’ great focus on locally sourced products, sustainable systems, and local culture. Being located in Appalachia, we are situated in an area identified as high-risk for many problems, particularly social issues. However, the remote, natural setting of Appalachia also provides a great canvas for greater self-reliance of communities. (Website of local food business)

Tracy from Community Food Initiatives echoed this sentiment and further described that community self-sufficiency is important because “no one is coming here to save us. So we need to be the solution to our own problems.” While much of Appalachia has been marginalized and disenfranchised for many years and people may want to work to take care of themselves, it is questionable whether the self-sufficiency model will actually be helpful in the end. Such a mentality may not recognize structural issues, and may prevent stakeholders from doing policy work and pushing for large-scale solutions that will result in large-scale political economic change.

Currently, the work done by actors in the Athens area local food system to address food insecurity remains focused on local strategies. However, the high levels of food insecurity in Athens County indicate that further work and additional strategies are needed to increase access to healthy, local food for low-income consumers effectively. For example, my observations, along with anecdotal evidence provided by interview participants and other community members, indicate that most participants in the local food system, particularly those who frequent the Athens Farmers Market, are educated, affluent people, employed by Ohio University. While some of these people may face
food insecurity, it is unlikely that they constitute the majority of the approximately 13,260 food insecure residents of Athens County (Feeding America 2017a). Therefore, the question remains as to why more low-income, food-insecure people are not accessing local food markets, potentially increasing their food security through increased access to healthy foods. After all, being truly food secure requires access to sufficient quantities of nutritious food (CFS 2012) and Athens area organizations working on issues of food access consider local food ideal for increasing food security. The Appalachia Accessible Food Network defines healthy food as “nutritionally dense” and prioritizes locally produced food.

Our definition of healthy food is those foods that are nutritionally dense and have less salt, sugar, and fat – fish, nuts, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Our definition also includes local versus global food, which impacts freshness, control over products and processes (healthier process and inputs versus less healthy), and their carbon impacts. Healthy food is also, in our view, food that creates a healthier economy and greater resilience and food security in our communities.

Although not all locally produced foods are healthy, there is evidence that local food may be fresher and retain more nutrients than conventionally produced foods (Martinez et al 2010). If so, increasing access to locally produced foods may increase food security. The following section will explore ways in which the neoliberal elements described above may limit the ability of the Athens area local food system to increase access and food security for low-income people.
Research Question 2: Do These Neoliberal Elements Affect the Ability of Actors in the Local Food System to Increase Access and Food Security among Athens County’s Low-Income Residents?

The neoliberal elements in the Athens area local food system described above limit the ability of actors in the local food system to increase access and food security among Athens County’s low-income residents. This section will begin with a brief review of the vision that stakeholders have for the local food system, followed by a description of how neoliberal elements limit their ability to increase low-income food security. Specifically at fault is the high price of local food in the market-based system. Paradoxically, an emphasis on consumer responsibility combined with a lack of a welcoming environment for low-income consumers also limit the ability of the local food system to enhance food security. In addition, the nonprofits that advocate for the Athens local food system are not equipped to address the extra-local scales where structural change must also occur.

Stakeholder Vision for the Local Food System

Interview participants expressed a variety of ideals in their visions of what the Athens area local food system should be. An overarching theme is the idea of a sustainable local food system that is “good for the environment, good for the economy, and good for the people” (Mel). Considering the dominance of the market focus in the Athens area local food system, it is no surprise that the economic benefits of local food were the most frequently mentioned by interview participants. Several stakeholders focused on a desire for the local food system to provide a space where local farmers and
food businesses can make sufficient incomes while charging fair prices for their food. There is a widespread belief that development of local food markets will lead to a resilient and prosperous economy. Such an economic situation is thought to lead to increased social benefit, including the ideal scenario of equal access to fresh, healthy, local food.

Several stakeholders held the belief that local food systems create a smaller environmental impact, use less resources, and are more resilient in the face of changing climates than larger scale food systems. Jo, a local business owner, also noted that actors in local food systems may be better able to incorporate the true costs of production that are “externalized onto the environment and onto social injustice” by the corporate food system. The mission statements of the four nonprofits included in this study, outlined in Table 3 in Chapter 3, reflect this collective vision. Largely, the methods used to meet their goals fit within the neoliberal paradigm through either a profit-driven market focus, an emphasis on the personal responsibility of consumers, or accommodating mandates imposed by grant funders. Together, these neoliberal elements limit the ability of local food system stakeholders to meet their vision. In addition, these elements of neoliberalism constrain increasing the food security of low-income people in the Athens area.

“Everybody Here Should Be Making More Money”

When operating under a hegemonic structure such as neoliberalism, it is difficult to imagine ways of doing things that are beyond it. In the Athens area, this helps to explain the heavy market focus by producers and nonprofits. By extension, since the local
food system operates primarily through markets, its actors are ultimately dependent upon profit. Every farmer that was interviewed mentioned that income and profitability were important motivations for their work, and that, at least to some extent, they struggle with making sufficient income. Pat, an agricultural extension agent, shared numbers from the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture showing that in Athens County, “273 of the farmers’ main source of income was farming and 449 where their primary occupation was ‘other.’” Pat also shared that in Athens County, “on average, every farm lost at least $1,000 a year.” Kris, a local organic farmer, also discussed this problem and described their desire to bring back a situation where farmers are able to make a viable income from the farm, without the need for off-farm employment.

I think really the operative question shouldn’t be how vibrant the local food system is, but how many people who are within the food system, it’s the only way they make their living. And I think when you look at that, it changes how that system looks. Because I would say that virtually maybe ten percent of the people who are involved with that rely on that solely for their income. Some, they’ve got a partner who’s got a real job, they’ve got other sources of income, they do other things, maybe they’re not full time, maybe when people come to market they have a job at the university and just do the market because it’s fun. And it’s really nice that there’s all of this local stuff, and I don’t think it hurts… But I think it’s another way of looking at what is this local food system here? Who are the people who only rely on what they do here for their income in Athens? Who are those people? And are they grant-funded mainly? Are they just re-writing new grants constantly as a source of income to keep their business afloat? Or is it really commerce that’s going on?

Farmers such as Kris who do not have off-farm employment to supplement their income may struggle to make ends meet. Kris expressed that they and their partner are several months behind on paying themselves. Kris also employs about seven people, and noted, “Everybody else has to be paid before we can be. That’s the downside of being a business owner. You’re the last person to get paid.” Kris would like to see farm work provide a
living wage for themselves and their employees, recognized that both they and their employees are most likely eligible for SNAP, and stated, “everybody here should be making more money.” When considering further steps they could take to improve the situation, Kris said, “I don’t know. I guess it’s time to raise our prices. But, we’ll see.” While raising prices would help Kris make ends meet and potentially increase their food security and that of their employees, higher costs would also make their locally produced, organic food less accessible to low-income consumers.

Beyond income from CSA, retail, and wholesale markets, some farmers apply for grants to help fund special projects. Kris received a USDA grant that helped them expand their income stream by developing a peer-to-peer education program for other farmers. Another farmer, Tony, received a USDA grant to help cover the costs of installing high tunnels for season extension. However, grants do not provide a panacea for farmers struggling financially. Many grants only provide matching funds or are reimbursement-based, requiring the farmer to provide some or all of the money up front. Despite this, Kris expressed a desire to be grant-funded just so they can afford to farm.

Local food business owners echoed many of the financial concerns shared by farmers. Leigh said that it was not until the sixth year of operation that they and their partner were able to take home a “subsistence allowance.” Jo, a local restaurant owner, noted that they really do not have profit because everything that comes in is used to cover the operating costs of the business. They attributed the lack of profit to the fact that they are “incorporating the true costs of food, the true costs of energy, the true costs of living
wages for people,” which many other businesses do not do. However, low profit margins lead them to live what they described as “precarious lives.”

We don’t have health insurance, and certainly no benefits or pension plans. So it was a stupid business to go into. [Laughs] But I love to eat and I love enjoying the kinds of foods that are grown around here and sharing them with the community. I don’t regret it, it’s just hard to attain the utopian ideals that I feel like we all deserve to be living. (Jo)

These ‘utopian ideals’ include valuing workers and incorporating costs that are “externalized onto the environment and onto social injustice” by actors in the global, industrial food system. In addition to contributing to a lack of profit, Jo recognized that valuing these ideals could lead to local food being financially inaccessible for low-income people: “When you do value it, like we try to do, it’s out of reach for the people who need it the most!” They also pointed out that higher-priced, locally or ethically produced food also means higher sales tax for consumers, and paying workers a fair wage means higher employment taxes for producers, both of which are further disincentives for “doing the right thing.”

It’s hard to be so committed to these values when government policies don’t necessarily reward them. And in a way, we’re penalized. For example, there’s a sales tax. So people are paying higher tax on food based on the cost of that food. And we’re paying higher worker’s comp – different taxes we pay based on how much we pay our workers. So if I were paying workers minimum wage, then I’d only have to pay the government a smaller amount for the same benefits. So, in a way, you’re penalized, or at least you’re not rewarded for doing the right thing. (Jo)

Although business owners like Jo who value ‘doing the right thing’ more than a high profit margin may struggle to thrive in a neoliberal capitalist system, their resistance against dominant business models is an important part of counter-hegemony.

Nevertheless, these issues that limit profitability for farmers and food business owners
translate into difficulty charging prices that allow local food to be accessible to people of all income levels.

When considering how to increase farmers’ profitability, Pat, an agricultural extension agent, noted that one thing holding them back is poor marketing and producing niche items:

Some of the things that people come up with are very limited niche market items and they’re going to have to be really creative about how they’re going to sell those unless they’re just going to do it as a small supplement to their other income is the biggest thing.

Kris, a local farmer, echoed the need for help with marketing, suggesting that marketing should be the focus of the local Food Policy Council and other local food initiatives.

Several interview participants mentioned one aspect of marketing as a particular struggle: advertising. Local restaurant owner Jo described their discomfort with advertising, because they consider it manipulative.

I’m really anti-advertising, which is a ridiculous thing to be when you’re in business. And sometimes I try to do a little bit of advertising because I know it works, but I hate it so much, and I hate that people are exposed to so many ads, even unconsciously… So, we try not to tell people what to buy or entice people too much. We sell cookies here, and the visual of the cookies in a way is telling people, “Oh you want to eat this.” And I feel a little bad about that, because I don’t think people should be eating a lot of sugar… I mean, what if there was no advertising? I can’t imagine that a lot of this [processed] food would hold up because why would you choose to eat this food except that its seen as cool, its seen as everybody’s doing it.

In addition, many local food system stakeholders cannot afford to do much advertising. This leads them to rely on free or cheap methods such as social media, flyers, and word of mouth. These marketing methods have a limited reach, and may be less accessible to rural and low-income residents who may have limited internet access or make infrequent
trips to areas where flyers are posted. In addition, ads created by local food businesses are competing against those made by actors in corporate food systems who have much larger advertising budgets, further contributing to the uneven competition created by agricultural subsidies. Clearly, neoliberal business-friendly policies do not equally benefit all scales and types of businesses, and Athens area farmers and food businesses struggle to make sufficient income, even when charging relatively high prices. This struggle for profit within the market-based local food system contributes to limiting the financial accessibility of locally produced food for low-income consumers.

The Price of Local Food

Within capitalism, local food system producers must charge prices for their food that are high enough to generate sufficient revenue to meet their needs, particularly while attempting to remain competitive with corporate and large-scale producers. However, as described above, most farmers and food business owners in the Athens area struggle to make enough money to cover their expenses, let alone make a profit. This is due to a number of factors, including poor marketing, unfair government policies that benefit large-scale producers, and the tendency of local producers to incorporate more ethical practices, which raise production costs. The financial constraints that producers feel often lead them to raise the prices of their food in order to cover their own costs. These higher prices charged by local food producers then limit their ability to provide their products to low-income consumers. In a study of a farmers market in West Oakland, California, Alkon and Mares (2012, 335) reiterate the ineffectiveness of market-based systems to
address for addressing social issues due to local food being financially inaccessible for low-income consumers:

Indeed, the farmers market reproduces neoliberalism through its reliance on free market exchange to address social problems. This approach excludes low-income people who, no matter how sympathetic, cannot afford to participate in this form of local exchange. In addition, the farmers market creates neoliberal subjectivities by conceptualizing those it seeks to serve as (potential) producers and consumers rather than citizens and activists. This leaves residents without the tools necessary to challenge the structural conditions of their marginalization.

Although the high price of food in local markets is not an explicitly neoliberal problem, neoliberal theory holds that markets are the best way to address social problems. However, high prices limit financial accessibility for low-income consumers, constraining the ability of the market-based local food system to address food insecurity.

In Athens County, an area with high poverty and unemployment rates, many people are unable to participate in the local food system. For some, a lack of knowledge about or desire to purchase local food may be a barrier, but even those who wish to participate may not be able to. Taylor, a former AmeriCorps member at Rural Action, was eligible for and used SNAP while serving. When they left AmeriCorps, they were no longer eligible for SNAP, despite continuing to have a low income. After working in the local food system, Taylor was highly engaged and motivated to support local farmers but was no longer able to do so as much as they would like because local food was too expensive for their limited income:

I was buying everything local for the most part, and I always knew it was expensive and inaccessible, because that’s just the nature of it, but now I can’t afford it. I just can’t. I do some things, and I still do go to the market, but I can’t make it out to Chesterhill [Produce Auction] as much. But I go to the market for the most part. I try to support local businesses since I can’t always afford local food.
Taylor expressed that one of their goals for the future is “to get a good job and then I want to make enough money so that I can actually do what I’ve been saying.” Of course, the idea that one would need a high-paying job in order to participate in the local food system is part of the problem in the first place.

Not only does the high price of local food make it financially inaccessible for low-income people, their ability to enhance their food purchasing power with federal entitlement programs has decreased with the retrenchment of food stamps and SNAP in recent decades. Currently, SNAP benefits average about four dollars a day per person (USDA 2017c). At this low level, even those who are enrolled in SNAP may be unable to participate in the local food system, where food prices are often higher than in grocery stores. SNAP users who do prioritize buying local food can use their benefits at the Athens Farmers Market, Country Fresh Stops, and several small grocery stores in the area that stock local foods. However, despite multiple attempts, Rural Action has not been able to get SNAP accepted at the Chesterhill Produce Auction. Two Rural Action staff members expressed their frustration with this.

We’ve been trying to get [SNAP] at the produce auction for years, and we keep getting refused because we don’t operate in some normal, recognizable model that they will fund. So that’s been a barrier. We don’t have access to a lot of the things like urban markets and food stamps. (Sam)

We’ve been trying for years… to get EBT [SNAP benefits] at the produce auction and it’s just impossible… Because it’s not a farmers market, it’s not a grocery store, its unprecedented from a policy standpoint, so it’s easy to say no. And it’s just not helpful, because the whole mission is to help low-income people and to create economic stability and how can we do that without being accessible to those people? (Taylor)
Even with the low benefits that SNAP participants currently receive, if they are unable to use them at all local food markets, their ability to participate financially in the local food system is decreased.

Finding a way to accept SNAP at the Chesterhill Produce Auction could make a significant impact for low-income people. Produce from the auction tends to be quite cheap, even relative to grocery store prices: Mel from Rural Action said five dozen ears of corn might go for three dollars, and on one of my own trips to the auction, I came home with about twenty pounds of butternut squash for only eight dollars. As long as the Chesterhill Produce Auction is unable to accept SNAP, those who want to get the biggest local food bang for their ‘SNAP buck’ are out of luck. This is particularly significant because the produce auction is considered a rural food access point by practitioners, but if rural, low-income people cannot use their SNAP benefits there, its impacts are limited. At the end of the day, most people enrolled in SNAP are more likely to purchase food at grocery stores, where food is cheaper and they can make the most of their limited food budgets. Sam from Rural Action pointed out that the current configuration of the SNAP program is essentially a form of government subsidies for grocery stores.

When you talk about the food system, it all boils down to the Farm Bill… There’s two big pieces of the Farm Bill that are by far the majority of the Farm Bill. The biggest one is SNAP benefits, that’s like sixty or seventy [percent] now… So that’s the big chunk, and that subsidizes the grocery stores mainly. You could feed people a lot cheaper if you just donated them food. But that would be disenfranchising, so I’m glad they don’t do that. But I’m just saying that also if around here twenty percent of people are on food stamps, if you took that out of the grocery store market, we’d have a lot less grocery stores. So that’s good for the overall grocery stores as well as it is for the people.
By not allowing local food outlets such as the Chesterhill Produce Auction to accept SNAP, the state is limiting the ability of the market-based local food system to address food insecurity.

The Appalachia Accessible Food Network recognizes that cost is an important aspect in addressing food insecurity, and defines the availability of food based on its affordability.

Food is only truly available if it is also affordable, so our definition includes cost. The idea of healthy food as available requires enough food produced by farmers and brought into the region by distributors to grow supply and reduce costs; the available donations to the Food Bank which are then made available to food pantries; and the infrastructure needs for storage and space that can keep foods fresh and on-hand. In our view, all pantries should be choice pantries, but there are availability, cost, and capacity issues to making that so.

They also recognize that household incomes must increase in order to address food insecurity. As Jordan from ACEnet put it, “you can’t sell things to people that don’t have the money to buy it from you.” In the current market-based local food system, food-insecure people may face financial barriers that prevent them from participating. Because of this, local food as a means of addressing food insecurity may not be possible. Indeed, the market-based system within which the Athens area local food system operates is not currently meeting the food security needs of the local population, and it is likely to remain inaccessible to a large number of people. Financial issues are, however, not the only barriers preventing low-income, food-insecure people from accessing local food markets. The focus on the personal responsibility of consumers within the Athens area local food system creates a situation in which low-income people are supposed to take
charge of their own food security, yet they may not feel welcome participating in the
local food system to begin with.

*Emphasis on Personal Responsibility and the Lack of a Welcoming Environment for Low-Income Consumers*

The emphasis on personal responsibility in the Athens area local food system reinforces neoliberal ideals, transferring responsibility for the well-being of residents away from the state. Harvey (2005) points out that within the neoliberal state, as welfare and social service programs are decreased, personal responsibility is presented as the alternative. The emphasis on personal responsibility reinforces individual consumption and the market as the space for social change. The term ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ is used to describe the ways that “market logic increasingly pervades individuals’ and communities’ everyday thoughts and practices as we embrace such ideals as individualism, efficiency, and self-help (Alkon and Mares 2012, 348). As neoliberal subjects, most actors in the Athens area local food system uphold these ideals, intentionally or not, and promote personal responsibility for well-being. This reinforces the idea that low-income individuals are somehow responsible for addressing structural problems that they did not create.

However, there are several ways that low-income people may be marginalized by local food system actors, which may contribute to discomfort in participating in local food markets. Marginalization of low-income people may lead to mental or emotional obstacles that deter them from participating in the local food system. When this occurs, their food security needs cannot be addressed by the local food system (Alkon and Mares...
2012). Tracy from Community Food Initiatives recognized that this might be present in the Athens area.

Is everyone invited? And do they feel welcome? Not even just like… Well anyone can come to the farmers market. But, does someone that is on SNAP benefits, are they gonna feel comfortable there? Is someone from Glouster [a rural town about fifteen miles away from Athens] gonna feel comfortable coming to the Athens Farmers Market?

My personal experience using SNAP benefits at the Athens Farmers Market reflects this discomfort. Despite holding a strong belief that SNAP participants should use their benefits at farmers markets and knowing that a free ten-dollar incentive for using SNAP at the Athens Farmers Market exists, it took me several weeks to get up the nerve to walk up to the SNAP token booth for the first time. Even after I had my tokens, I experienced a high level of anxiety about using them openly at the market. There is something distinctly different about handing a vendor tokens compared to using an EBT card at a grocery store, which is just like swiping a debit or credit card, and where only the cashier knows I am using SNAP. Using tokens made, and continues to make, me feel vulnerable and exposed – an easy target for anyone who might hold judgment or stigma towards those receiving federal benefits – and it is unlikely that I am alone in this fear of being stereotyped.

Low-income people are often negatively stereotyped, especially those who live in Appalachia, a place that has long been the center of negative representations of ‘poor’ people. The Athens area is no exception to this, with several interview participants describing or perpetuating these stereotypes. Tracy, who grew up in a neighboring Appalachian county, explained that there are “very pervasive negative messages about
what it means to be from here” that come from “cultural messaging telling me that I have
to hate it here.” Mel recounted hearing people at the Athens Farmers Market refer to low-
income people whose families have lived in the area for generations as “hill jacks” and
“mouth-breathers,” among other things. Local farmer Kris noted difficulty in describing
their customers while remaining politically correct:

At a market-level, my customers tend to be educated, and what do I mean, educated… Boy, it’s hard to describe customers and still stay politically correct. People who are hand to mouth in terms of their finances, are probably not my customer. My customer needs a certain amount of disposable income. My customer probably is someone who is concerned with their health and the health of their family. That makes choices based on those things… My customer is probably not someone who chain smokes, I’m guessing.

Tony, another local farmer, when describing their rural, low-income neighbors said,
“dealing with some of the clientele that live around here can be challenging… they think
differently and they have a lot of time on their hands, which leads to things they
shouldn’t be doing.” When asked about their awareness of the high poverty and food
insecurity levels in Athens County, local farmer Rob proceeded to describe low-income
people in the following way: “I remember when I was a kid that you’d go up these hollers
going to my grandparents’ place and the kids wouldn’t have clothes and they’re crawling
out the windows of the houses and stuff like that.” Rob continued by noting their
perception that in the past “poor people grew their own gardens and being poor was not a
bad connotation because people worked and were honest.” These statements not only
perpetuate negative stereotypes of low-income people, they also reiterate the emphasis on
personal responsibility for well-being.
The fact that some of the same stakeholders who perpetuate stereotypes also focus on expanding local food markets might be contradictory; when low-income and food-insecure people feel looked down upon or marginalized, they are less likely to participate in local food markets. Because of this, part of the solution to addressing low-income food insecurity in the area is changing mindsets and removing stigmas so that low-income people feel welcome participating in the local food system. This would not only contribute to increased low-income food security, it would also create a larger customer base for local food markets, supporting the work of nonprofits in expanding these markets, benefitting both producers and consumers.

*Nonprofits Constrained by Funding Structures*

As described under Research Question 1, much of the current success of the Athens area local food system is dependent on nonprofits providing infrastructure to support it. These nonprofits are funded mostly by grants and donations, which are not guaranteed sources of funding, and are therefore somewhat precarious and unsustainable. This funding structure constrains nonprofits, causing them to focus largely on their own day-to-day operation and staying afloat. Because of this, they are further constrained in their missions of building the local food economy and addressing food insecurity. Nonprofits in the Athens area receive funding from a variety of sources: grants come from the government (ex. USDA and state agencies), national foundations (ex. Aetna Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), local foundations, and local family funds. Funding is also sourced through special fundraising events, membership, sponsorship, donations, and fees for workshops, classes, and consultation services. In
addition, several organizations operate social enterprises, which produce revenue through selling a product or service, potentially increasing the stability of nonprofit funding streams. Obtaining funding from this variety of sources takes up substantial staff resources.

Nonprofits commit significant staff hours toward obtaining grants and following up with required reporting. According to Tracy from Community Food Initiatives, there is only one person at the organization responsible for “fund development, including grant writing, fundraising, and donor development.” Similarly, Alex from ACEnet described their role in every aspect of the grant writing process:

I work on grant writing and grant reporting for grants that we have in place, and then working on the programs that are written into some grants that we have. So with that it’s like researching funding opportunities that would fit into [our work]… So I make sure that we are doing what we said we did in the grant, keeping on timeline, spending as much money as was allocated for supplies for the market, things like that.

When asked how they identified potential grant opportunities, Taylor, a former AmeriCorps member at Rural Action, said that staff members apply to grants from which they have previously received funding; discover grant opportunities through networking with other people doing food systems work, sometimes collaborating on grants; search government databases; and subscribe to listservs. Jordan from ACEnet noted that they are often looking for funding several years in advance of when they expect to need it, which introduces additional challenges: “And by that time, the trends or the needs have changed or shifted over time. And that’s just one of those challenges that just sucks. But that’s the reality.” On top of all this, nonprofit staff is often not well trained in grant writing, which can limit their success:
I didn’t have any grant writing experience coming into it. And leaving it I still didn’t feel confident in the process, because I just don’t feel like anybody in the organization – and this is not a bash – it’s just everybody is coming from different backgrounds, and I don’t feel like anyone’s ever sat down and learned how to write a grant extensively… The process is very hectic… because everybody’s so busy and we don’t have our own grant-writing department. It’s just so hard to get things out, but we did… So I like to say that my grant writing experience was kind of trial by fire. And my first year I didn’t bring in a single grant on my own, which was really frustrating because the person before me had brought in all this money… I was so angry that I couldn’t bring anything in, but it’s such a process and nobody gets every grant they write, so I have to keep telling myself it’s okay. (Taylor)

Not only does the lack of training limit the potential success of grant writers, it is also a product of being grant-funded with limited budgets and insufficient resources to train staff. Because the success of the Athens area local food system is largely dependent on support from nonprofits, the struggle to obtain funding may put the local food system at risk.

Another constraint of grant funding is that funders have their own goals that direct how they distribute money. For nonprofits eager for funding, these funder requirements may affect what work is done or how it is accomplished. Jessie, a staff member at Live Healthy Appalachia, described how this affects their work:

I think with any grant we make all of these promises to grantors; this is why they give us the money. So I think any time that we have a grant it’s going to kind of drive the work in some way. How we’re doing it or how we’re trying to meet certain expectations.

In ‘driving the work,’ funder priorities can also affect the ability of nonprofits to do the work they want to do. Tracy from Community Food Initiatives expressed a desire to do work towards job development and training for local people to decrease unemployment and poverty. They noted that while they thought it was possible to do that type of work, it
would require “having some investors who believe in the potential of the project.”

Without interested funders, the project cannot progress.

Sometimes, however, funder priorities end up benefitting nonprofit organizations. For example, because increasing healthy food access is a popular goal for many funders, nonprofits may be able to increase the amount of funding they receive by adding healthy food access programming to grant proposals. Jessie from Live Healthy Appalachia described how a funder’s desire to fund food access projects led them to adjust how they evaluate their programming in order to receive the grant:

So a lot of what we’re doing with that program, it’s affecting our evaluation piece. We’re just making sure that we’re definitely asking those before and after questions about food access specifically, whereas before we may have only asked about behaviors… And I think we always want to be realistic about what we have time to do and what we’re capable of doing. So if we were to look at a grant and it had just unrealistic expectations, we would not apply. So I think with the [current] grant, it’s actually been a good thing because it’s really widening what kind of data we’re collecting from the outset. So it’s a good thing. But there’s always little things that come along with any kind of funding source like that.

While funder requirements may sometimes benefit nonprofits by allowing opportunities for additional funding or helping them to rethink aspects of their work, such requirements can also tempt organizations to change or add new programs to make themselves attractive to funders. Community Food Initiatives staff member Tracy explained how they negotiate funder priorities and their own needs:

We try to be very wary of mission creep. We don’t want to start a new project just because there’s money out there for it. And I’m predominantly just wanting to fund what we’re already doing. Sometimes that means that the trick is that you know funders want to see specific things, too. They have their own set of needs. So, it’s kind of seeing where there’s enough common ground. And perhaps that means altering things just slightly… It’s usually very minor changes if we need to do anything.
However, when funder priorities influence the work that nonprofits do, their ability to approach problems such as food insecurity in new and creative ways may be inhibited.

In addition, funder goals can lead to what Jordan from ACEnet called “duplication of services.” In the Athens area, this is particularly apparent when it comes to programs and services related to healthy food education and access. Along with the several nonprofits working on food access and education, the agricultural extension agency, health departments, Job and Family Services, and other organizations in the area also operate programs to address these needs. Jordan continued by describing why they think this situation exists:

I think people are siloed. It’s hard to get out of your silo, especially at whatever institutional or organizational level, especially if you learned how to do it that way… The politics of the situation make me think that it’s either funding that they want to apply for, and that’s just one little piece of their program is that… [or] I think that it’s organizational, ‘What’s in it for me?’ And I am always like, ‘What’s in it for our target audience and beneficiaries?’

An often-presented solution to this programmatic redundancy is to create a ‘referral network’ of organizations where each organization has its own specialty and they refer people to each other, rather than adding additional programming to their current repertoire. According to Jordan, the reason such a referral network does not yet exist is that nonprofit staff is too busy to take the time to sit down and figure out how such a system would work. Again, this lack of time is related to funding constraints and limited staff hours. When nonprofits and other organizations have duplicate services, the variety of interventions in which they engage to address social need such as food insecurity is restricted.
Limited nonprofit budgets are a widespread problem, too, constraining directors from being able to hire additional staff to oversee expanded programming, and preventing current staff from making what they feel is sufficient income.

This job has shown me you really do have to be passionate in what you do, especially in the nonprofit sector… The pay is never going to really compensate you for the amount of work that you put into the work and the investment of your time, and your energy, and your personal life, your personal passion. (Jordan, ACEnet staff member)

Funding constraints also make it difficult for nonprofits to purchase equipment and expand programming. Tracy, a Community Food Initiatives staff member, mentioned that about ten years ago the organization received expanded funding for a few years and took the opportunity to increase their programming, beginning their school garden program at that time. However, without sustained funding, nonprofits are unable to maintain programming efforts. A further impact of funding constraints is limited budgets for advertising and outreach. Most organizations rely heavily on free outreach opportunities through Facebook, other social media, word-of-mouth, email newsletters, and community calendars facilitated by local media outlets. However, they also print posters and other paper marketing materials that they distribute throughout the area. Largely, the amount and type of advertising organizations engage in is dependent on available funding:

Social media is something we can do with little funding, just takes the staff time to do it. But if we have the funding, we’ll create rack cards, or posters, or even this year we created vertical banners [for a local farmers market]. (Alex, ACEnet staff member)

Both the ability to operate programs and the ability to engage the public in these programs are constrained by limited budgets. When aimed at increasing healthy food access and food security, limited outreach restricts the impacts these programs can have.
In addition to a reliance on grants, each nonprofit organization relies heavily on funding from individual donors as well as the donated work hours of volunteers to meet their goals. The website of each organization includes an element requesting financial support, which is typically present on every page of the site. Financial donations are used to support general programming as well as the purchase of equipment. ACEnet’s website even offers the option of funding the purchase of individual equipment or programming activities, providing the donor with a feeling of control over how their money is used. Donors also have the ability to become members of some organizations, with membership bringing voting privileges, reduced prices on merchandise, and free or reduced entry to workshops and events.

The theory of change document published by the Appalachia Accessible Food Network emphasizes the goal of continued reliance on donation for increasing healthy food access. Objectives include “Farmers and processors are able to price products and make donations into the emergency food system with benefits to them and to low income people,” and, “Charitable corporate donors help meet demand… Corporations use their donations to strategically drive healthy production and access.” Tony, a local farmer, summed up their experience donating food by saying “to get healthy food in to the local people, whether they be the poor or whomever… it kind of makes you feel better,” reiterating the idea that all parties benefit when charity is practiced. This focus on donation reflects the presence of the retreat to charity in the Athens area local food system.
In addition to monetary and food donations, nonprofits rely heavily on the donated work hours of volunteers from the community. One goal in the Appalachia Accessible Food Network theory of change document is that “volunteer opportunities exist and are well coordinated to support harvesting, gleaning, and processing.” When describing Rural Action’s work processing food in order to drive a market, Sam stated that, “hundreds of volunteer hours go into this.” Jessie from Live Healthy Appalachia noted that volunteers are largely responsible for both their child and adult education programs, stating that the organization has “lots of really good volunteers.” To some extent, nonprofits rely on volunteers because of funding constraints that limit their ability to hire staff.

One way that nonprofits deal with funding constraints is by generating revenue to help cover their operating costs and create stability in their funding streams. All four nonprofits included in this study generate revenue through fees associated with classes, workshops, or consultation services that they offer. Some also generate revenue by creating a product that they can sell. For example, Live Healthy Appalachia is working to develop its elementary school healthy food education curriculum into a package that can be sold for use in other school districts. Community Food Initiatives has a Donation Station replication program for organizations interested in starting the program in other places. The replication program includes an assessment of the predicted success of the Donation Station in the new location as well as staff training and licensing. The total cost for Donation Station replication is five thousand dollars (Community Food Initiatives website).
Another way that nonprofits generate revenue is by forming social enterprises, small businesses connected to the nonprofit that are set up to generate both social and financial return on investments (Campbell 2016). Social enterprises have arisen out of the neoliberal push for the social economy as a way of addressing social need with a shrinking welfare state (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003). However, such alternatives, rather than contributing to the available resources for addressing social issues such as poverty and food insecurity, are often more precarious and may reinforce the marginalization of disenfranchised social groups (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003). In addition, social enterprises themselves are often grant- and donor-funded and struggle to generate sufficient revenue to break free from these funding sources in order to become self-sustaining (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2003). For example, some of the startup costs for Community Food Initiatives’ Ridge & Hollow Seed Alliance were obtained via crowd sourcing with an online fundraising campaign and Community Food Initiatives still accepts donations to support the Seed Alliance. ACEnet’s food ventures shared-use kitchen generates revenue from rents that tenants pay, but Jordan from ACEnet noted that in trying to keep their rates low and remain financially accessible, they subsidize the operating costs of those facilities with grant funding. Rural Action’s Chesterhill Produce Auction is a key part of the success of the local food system, but is also reliant upon grant funding. Problems with these social enterprises expand beyond precarious funding structures: they are also taking up significant staff resources. Jordan, who also formerly worked at Rural Action, described their perspective on how the produce auction affects Rural Action’s larger programming goals:
I think there’s too much going on there because essentially Rural Action is running a business… Everything else, from my viewpoint, is just ancillary, the demand networks, and everything like that, because everybody’s time is eaten up by running a business, and I totally get that… I know how much time it takes to run a business and I respect that. But if we’re just running this business and then our programming activities are just good enough, I don’t like hearing that. That’s upsetting and it bothers me.

While the social enterprises do add a certain amount of revenue for the nonprofits and the goal is to develop them into autonomous revenue-generators, they are still heavily subsidized by grant and donation-based funding. In addition, because they take up significant staff resources, they may take time away from their other programming efforts, decreasing the ability of these organizations to address social issues such as food insecurity. All these funding constraints combine to create a precarious position for nonprofits that are providing essential services to support the local food system and increase access to healthy local food. Furthermore, funding struggles constrain the ability of nonprofits to affect change at the scales necessary to create structural change and address the root causes of social issues.

*Nonprofits are Not Equipped to Address Necessary Scales for Change*

Although Athens area nonprofits are engaged in a variety of local food system work, their focus on supporting food system infrastructure and market capacity building is not presenting a long-term solution to food insecurity or providing guaranteed access to food or services. On top of this, the funding struggles described above constrain these nonprofits from being able to affect change at the scales necessary to create structural change and address the root of the food insecurity problem. Alkon and Mares (2012, 349) have noted that as nonprofits step in to “fill the holes left by a shrinking state,” they
reinforce the idea that it is their role to deliver these. Furthermore, they “embrace new modes of governance” and often give up “on the state as a provider of services, regulator, or provider of subsidies - or at least harbor the conceit that change can be accomplished outside of the state” (Guthman 2008, 1175).

This ‘do-it-yourself’ mentality is common within the Athens area local food system, with little work being done to change or improve state-scale programs and policies. Indeed, very little was said by interview participants from nonprofits about issues of policy or politics at any scale. Allen et al (2003) noted a similar trend in a study of alternative agrifood initiatives in California: few respondents focused on policy reform, especially at the national scale. They focused instead on consumer education and outreach and developing markets, both of which are prevalent in the Athens area. Because of their funding constraints, Athens nonprofits largely focus on their own day-to-day operation and staying afloat, and mostly directly attempt to address food insecurity through charitable means, while generally ignoring other strategies. In addition, if the nonprofits were to lose their grant and donation-based funding sources, the food access programs that they currently operate would be lost. Although Athens area nonprofits consider themselves agents of change for solving local food insecurity, they are focused largely on the neoliberal projects of market capacity-building and promoting personal responsibility, not directly working to address the roots of food insecurity.

Many nonprofit staff members expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the amount of work expected of them or required in order to make an impact. Some people are overworked and stretched too thin, with their hands in too many projects to be able to
give any of them the time and energy they deserve. Others voiced feelings of being so caught up in their daily activities that they sometimes lose sight of the end goal:

“Sometimes I can’t see over the tip of my own nose because of my day to day. It’s hard for me to keep my eye on the prize, so to speak, at times” (Jordan from ACEnet). In addition to feeling overwhelmed, Jordan described a lack of clarity in their job role that caused them to struggle with feeling as if they were being effective in their position. Some interview participants expressed interest in seeing the results of this research so they could get a better idea of the big picture of what is going on in the local food system, because they are so embedded in their niche that it is difficult to get a holistic perspective.

Beyond the personal struggles that prevent nonprofit staff from being effective agents of change, some of the struggles that stakeholders face stem from the realities of working with the type of complicated, systemic problem that food insecurity presents. Sam from Rural Action described their struggle in trying to increase food access: “Food access is like something is not working in the system, so that’s creating a lack of food access. So trying to mess with a broken system, that’s hard.” Other nonprofit staff talked about it being difficult to stay motivated when they realize how long it may take system-wide change to take place:

I know that this is multi-generational project here, and when I say here, I don’t just mean here, I mean all over. It’s a multi-generational project. But someone was just like, ‘Yeah, but it may take twenty or thirty years for you to even actualize that.’ And I was like, ‘Oh my gosh,’ because in my brain I’m always just like, ‘Work real hard and get it done!’ So even I have to remember to hold my horses. (Jordan from ACEnet)
When thinking about the necessary scales of change, Taylor from Rural Action expressed that they do not think they will ever do enough work to satisfy themselves. Jo, a local restaurant owner, brought up an additional barrier to creating meaningful change, noting that they benefit by not being a nonprofit because they are able to engage in activist work that they may not be able to do if they were grant-funded.

We’re not a nonprofit, so actually we have an advantage that way. Because sometimes when I talk to people who work for nonprofits around here, and I try to inspire them to do more activist work to protect our environment, for example, or to get healthy food in the schools. A lot of nonprofits are bound by these restrictions of “we can only do this much percentage of political work” or something. I’ve never been a part of a nonprofit, so I don’t understand exactly how that works. I understand that because they’re getting money from the government they can’t say bad things… I don’t know. I’m really glad that we don’t have those restrictions.

In the neoliberal paradigm, when nonprofits are heavily relied upon to address social need, if they are limited in their advocacy work, they are also limited in the change they can create. In addition, as long as nonprofits with precarious funding structures are providing significant support to local food markets, low-income, food-insecure people will continue to be left out, especially due to the inaccessible nature of the market-based paradigm within which the local food system operates.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Acknowledging Counter-Hegemony in the Athens Area Local Food System

Although this research takes a critical perspective in identifying pervasive neoliberalization within the Athens area local food system, the intention is not to place blame on individual actors. Those who reproduce neoliberal forms may do so without realizing it, particularly when operating under a hegemonic system such as neoliberalism. However, as Pionetti (2005) notes, “The nature of hegemony itself thus contains seeds of subversion: resistance is an integral part of hegemony, and it needs to be studied in conjunction with processes of domination” (39). Some instances of such resistances to the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism can be found within the Athens area local food system. For example, there are at least two cooperative food businesses in the local food system. Although these businesses operate within the market system, their profit sharing and worker-owned structures differentiate them from the dominant capitalist economic system and its reliance on the exploitation of labor. Gibson-Graham (2006) recognize cooperative businesses in their model of a ‘diverse economy,’ categorizing them as forms of paid labor that are alternative to mainstream capitalism. A similar example of resistance against the exploitation of labor is evident in the practices of business owners like Jo, who prioritize paying workers a living wage over higher profit margins.

Another type of resistance within the Athens area local food system comes from local food business owner Leigh, who described their aspiration for a society and economy that move beyond money:

I also think that we need to build communities so that we realize that there are other kinds of currency and capital, besides cash capital, where we’re really
taking care of each other. I think we’ve been hooked into the money thing because that’s a way to control us.

Leigh continued by explaining that they grew up in a poor community where people took care of each other and their belief that community connections can replace the need for money. They ended by saying, “let’s change everything.” Leigh’s statements reflect a desire for a system that would likely fit into Gibson-Graham’s (2006) categories of transactions that are ‘alternative’ or ‘nonmarket’ in their model of the diverse economy. As such, Leigh’s beliefs represent ‘seeds of subversion’ against the neoliberal hegemony and its emphasis on markets. However, these sentiments were unusual among respondents in this research project.

In keeping, Allen et al (2003) recognize two types of resistance among agrifood initiatives: those that are oppositional and “seek to create a new structural configuration” and those that are alternative and “limited to incremental erosion at the edges of the political-economic structures” (61). The local food system in the Athens area fits the alternative rather than the oppositional model because it relies on neoliberal, market-based approaches to social change. As such, it does not pursue a ‘new structural configuration,’ and instead largely reproduces existing hegemonic structures. Allen et al (2003, 74) also note,

Many of the initiatives that address food access and food security also locate themselves carefully within an alternative, rather than oppositional, frame. Empowering (or rehabilitating) poor people, allowing them the circumstances to provide for their own needs, engages their condition without raising questions of rights and entitlements. Directly oppositional stances cannot be successful when they are only local; they require the power of a broader social movement to prevail.
This is an important distinction to make, and relates to the point made in Chapter 4 that local nonprofits are not equipped to address the scales necessary to solve food insecurity. Substantive change likely also requires policy action by federal, state, or local government. Jo, an Athens area restaurant owner, expressed their belief that such action would bring about meaningful change:

I mean, I love government! I wish we had more good government. Because I feel like it’s an extension of what we as individuals can do, but if we actually put our money together through our tax system to benefit us all, we could be doing a lot better… I just feel like we’ve got so much money, there’s plenty of money in the world and there’s not enough good being done with it.

To work effectively to improve social issues such as poverty and food security, nonprofits and other stakeholders must build out and work to affect broader social change.

Although the ‘seeds of subversion’ may be alternative or oppositional forms of resistance, Guthman (2008, 1181) reminds us that those that are only alternative “cannot be faulted, as activists must start somewhere.” The problem with such resistances is when they reproduce neoliberal subjectivities within a consumer and market-based system without examining the problems, and then carry those same problems into the solutions they present (Allen et al 2003). In addition, the ‘seeds of subversion’ may be hard to recognize, for, as Guthman (2008, 1181) has said,

It is difficult to know what something outside of neoliberalism might look like when all is seen as neoliberalism. And even though actually existing alternatives and resistances seem minute in comparison, that they exist at all is important.
Thus, it is important to recognize that the existence of the thriving local food system in the Athens area and the people who work within it that acknowledge the presence of social injustice is a vital first step toward subverting hegemony.

Limitations and Summary

The time allotted for the completion of a master’s thesis limited the extent of this research in several ways. First, a limited number of stakeholders could be interviewed due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts. Because of this, certain key stakeholders were not included. Second, because nonprofit staff was generally more available during the months that interviews took place, they may be overrepresented in this study. Finally, this study focuses on producers and nonprofits and may have benefitted from the inclusion of consumers and food-insecure people. The voices and perspectives of these additional people would contribute to the discussion of whom the Athens area local food system is serving, whom it is not serving, and how food insecurity is or is not addressed. Including additional stakeholders may also lead to increased ability to recognize resistances against neoliberalism within the local food system. These are considerations to be kept in mind for the development of future related research projects. Despite these limitations, I was able to interview a variety of stakeholders in the local food system and discover much about how the neoliberal political economy affects the local food system and low-income food insecurity in the Athens area.

The Athens area local food system exhibits elements of neoliberalism through a market-based focus, a ‘retreat to charity,’ and an emphasis on personal responsibility. The market focus is evident as nonprofits and other stakeholders work to create markets
and increase market capacities in the local food system as a means of leveling the playing field for local, small-scale producers in order to boost the local economy. This is accomplished through fostering entrepreneurialism and job creation, and by nonprofits providing infrastructural support for local food markets as well as working to increase the supply of local food. Together, these aspects of the Athens area local food system reflect a supply-side, producer-focused emphasis that largely ignores the needs of low-income residents. When social issues such as poverty and food insecurity are considered, stakeholders typically present market-based solutions, perpetuating the neoliberal shift of responsibility for the welfare of citizens away from the state. Such market-based solutions tend to produce food that is financially inaccessible to low-income, food-insecure people.

The retreat to charity is also the product of the state shirking its responsibilities as entitlement programs are retrenched and nonprofits and charity-based organizations step up to fulfill the food security needs of low-income people. The Donation Station and associated food pantry and free meal programs in the Athens area are evidence of this. While these programs provide food to some low-income people, their reliance upon charitable giving prevent them from offering guaranteed access to healthy food (Poppendieck 1998) and they instead focus on growing the local food economy. Thus, the Donation Station extends the neoliberal, supply-side model in its focus on supporting producers along with providing fresh local food to low-income people. However, the charitable model is not the preferred method of addressing food insecurity in the Athens
area, according to my respondents. Instead, an emphasis on the personal responsibility of consumers for their own food security is widespread.

The neoliberal ideal of the responsibility of individuals for their own well-being, witnessed through emphasis on personal responsibility of consumers and self-sufficiency of individuals and the community is common in the Athens area. These aspects of the local food system relate back to its market-based focus, as they are indicative of the state’s reduced role in social support and the focus instead on individual consumption through markets as the site of political action (Changfoot 2007, Guthman 2008). Together, these neoliberal elements present in the Athens area local food system constrain stakeholders and inhibit their ability to meet their goals of decreasing food insecurity. While large-scale change must come from beyond the local food system, the reproduction of neoliberalism through an emphasis on market ideals within the local food systems may limit its capacity to solve social problems such as food insecurity into the future.

As such, additional work must be done and new strategies must be adopted for low-income food insecurity to be addressed through the local food system. In keeping with this, I have formulated several ‘best practice’ recommendations for stakeholders in the Athens area local food system that will help them to both counter neoliberal tendencies and address food insecurity. These recommendations are based on the findings of this study, coming from both personal observations and the suggestions of interview participants.
Best Practices to Counter Neoliberal Tendencies in the Local Food System and Address Food Insecurity

The capitalist system within which the Athens area local food system and the United States at large operate is unlikely to end soon. However, there are a number of things that local food system stakeholders can do now to counter neoliberal tendencies and better address food insecurity. These recommendations recognize the hard work of actors in the Athens area local food systems and support the continued development of the local food system, while also calling for stronger state support for food security. In order to create meaningful change and be truly counter-hegemonic, stakeholders must look beyond the local scale, for this cannot occur unless hegemonic structures are addressed.

*Enhance SNAP Eligibility and the Benefits Available*

Stakeholders must focus on advocacy and activism work to increase federal entitlement programs, including both the number of people enrolled and the number of households that are eligible for SNAP and other federal nutrition programs. Advocating for the increase of federal entitlement programs would be the most effective way for local food system stakeholders to address low-income food insecurity. According to Feeding America (2017a), 70 percent of Athens County residents meet the basic income requirements for SNAP eligibility, yet only 15.6 percent are enrolled in SNAP (Ohio JFS 2015, U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). Although there are other eligibility requirements beyond income that may disqualify some people, such as work requirements and asset restrictions, it is unlikely that everyone who is currently eligible is enrolled. In addition,
eligibility for SNAP must also be expanded. In 2015, 26 percent of food-insecure people in the United States were above the income threshold for SNAP eligibility, making them currently ineligible for SNAP despite suffering from food insecurity (Feeding America 2017b).

Increase SNAP Redemptions in Local Food Markets

Local stakeholders must continue to press the state to expand the market locations where SNAP is accepted, including the Chesterhill Produce Auction, local food businesses, and all farmers markets. Simultaneously, stakeholders must work to increase the redemption of SNAP and other federal nutrition program benefits in these locations while creating a more welcoming environment for low-income consumers. Working to increase the amount of SNAP redemptions in local food markets will increase the amount of low-income food security needs being met by the local food system and provide a larger customer base for local food producers, allowing for expansion of the local food system and decreasing food insecurity.

For example, stakeholders must increase awareness that SNAP can be redeemed at the Athens Farmers Market. Data obtained from the Athens Farmers Market show that from 2014 to 2016, less than 2 percent of the dollar value of transactions each year are from SNAP token purchases. There is currently minimal notification of the ability to use SNAP benefits at the Athens Farmers Market beyond a brief mention on the market’s ‘About Us’ webpage that states that the market began accepting food stamps and SNAP electronic benefits transfer (EBT) in 2007. Signage at the market itself is also minimal;
the booth where tokens are obtained displays only a vague sign reading, “Tokens here” without any mention of SNAP or EBT.

In addition, SNAP administrators, who are regularly in contact with SNAP participants should increase their educational efforts about the ability to use SNAP at farmers markets. I enrolled in SNAP in August 2016 and did not receive any type of notification from SNAP administrators about the ability to use SNAP benefits at local farmers markets until June 2017. At that time, I received a letter from the Athens County Department of Job and Family Services titled, “Access Healthy Local Foods” describing how to use SNAP benefits at farmers markets and farm stands. The letter also included the URLs of websites for locating farmers markets, recipes for trying new foods, and nutrition education classes, and a flyer directing me to the Athens Farmers Market. This letter is an excellent instance of increasing public awareness of the ability to use SNAP and other food assistance benefits at farmers markets, but additional and more frequent efforts should be made to heighten awareness.

Furthermore, since June 2016, the Athens Farmers Market has taken part in Produce Perks, a federally funded program that allows SNAP recipients to receive ten dollars’ worth of free tokens when they take at least ten dollars off their EBT card. However, this program has not been widely publicized and information about it is not easily accessible. In fact, despite being enrolled in SNAP myself, I initially found out about the program through my work with the Athens Food Policy Council and had to ask the person staffing the token booth at the farmers market for confirmation that the program was actually operating. However, the letter I received from Athens County Job
and Family Services in June 2017 made a brief mention of this program. In small print at the bottom of the flyer on the second page it reads, “Some Ohio farmers’ markets offer an incentive program that provides individuals using an Ohio Direction [EBT] Card with extra funds to use at the market. Contact your local market to ask if it has an incentive program.” This was, however, the first written notification I had received of this program as a SNAP user. If people on SNAP are not aware of this program and its potential to increase the purchasing power of their limited SNAP benefits, they cannot benefit from it. Increasing awareness of this program would benefit both low-income, food-insecure people as well as farmers market vendors, who are paid real dollars for the tokens they receive.

*Increase Local Foods Purchased By and Consumed within Institutions*

Stakeholders should pursue state mandates to expand local foods purchased by and consumed within institutions such as schools and universities. This would provide healthy local food to people who work and study in these institutions, potentially increasing their food security. It would also help local food producers compete with actors in the corporate food system by providing a guaranteed space in the market. A state mandate would be required in order to guarantee that state-funded institutions adhere to such a policy. Stakeholders in the Athens area local food system already identify the “transformative” and “world-changing” potential if Ohio University were to commit to a stronger local food purchasing plan. The university’s Culinary Services currently purchases approximately 18 percent of its food locally (Ohio University 2017), but according to interview participants, its definition of local includes producers within a
three-hundred mile radius. This definition allows the university to purchase food from large-scale operations far from Athens, and limits its obligation to buy food from the immediate area. A state mandate requiring Ohio University and public schools to purchase increased quantities of food produced more locally would create economic impact for the local food system and provide students with healthy, locally produced food, potentially increasing their food security.

*Change Federal Subsidy Structure to Encourage Small-Scale Production*

Stakeholders should pursue changed to federal crop subsidy structures to encourage small-scale production of food. The current commodity crop subsidy model creates advantages for large-scale and corporate food producers. Decreasing commodity crop subsidies and increasing those for specialty crops and small-scale producers would help level the playing field for local farmers. This would help small-scale producers thrive and allow them to charge prices for their food that would be more accessible to low-income consumers. This increased accessibility would increase the ability of the local food system to address food insecurity.

If these recommendations were enacted, access to locally produced food would likely be increased for low-income residents. As the customer base for local food markets expands, producers would benefit from increased sales. In addition, by adjusting subsidies and expanding SNAP, local food system stakeholders would address the effects of the neoliberal political economy at the Federal scale.
REFERENCES


Schnell, S.M. 2013b. “Food Miles, Local Eating, and Community Supported Agriculture: Putting Local Food in its Place.” *Agriculture and Human Values* 30: 615-328.


USDA. 2016c. “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed).”
https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-
education-snap-ed (last accessed May 9, 2017).


https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-security-in-the-united-
states/documentation/ (last accessed June 24, 2017).

https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-
atlas/ (last accessed May 12, 2017).

May 4, 2017).

https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/34SNAPmonthly.pdf (last
accessed May 12, 2017).

Economy of Food and Poverty” in The Oxford Handbook of Economic
Geography, ed. Clark, G.L., Feldman, M.P., and Gertler, M.S. Oxford University
Press, 195-212.

Winchester, H.P.M. and Rofe, M.W. 2010. “Qualitative Research and Its Place in Human
Geography” in Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography, ed. Hay, I.


Young, E.M. 2012. “Globalization, Development and Malnutrition” in Food and
APPENDIX A: OHIO UNIVERSITY ADULT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: Local Food and Food Security in Athens County, Ohio

Researcher: Angela Chapman

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
The purpose of this research is to understand the relationship between high food insecurity and a location with a vibrant local food system.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your experience with the local food system and/or working with food-insecure people.

You should not participate in this study if you feel uncomfortable or concerned that answering my questions could harm you in anyway.

Your participation in the study will last approximately one hour. If you permit, the interview will be audio-recorded.

Risks and Discomforts
No risks or discomforts are anticipated. You may decline to participate in this research without penalty. Additionally, you may at any time withdraw from the interview or choose not to answer any questions without penalty.

Benefits
This study is important to science/society because it may lead to the development of recommendations that can improve both the local food system and the food security of the community

You may not personally benefit by participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Records
Your responses to my questions will not be linked to you in any presentations or written or published documents without your expressed, written consent on this document. All recordings, notes, and transcripts will be kept in either a locked drawer or on a password-
protected computer in a locked office. They will all be destroyed when the study is complete, which is expected to be in May of 2017.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

- Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
- Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Angela Chapman at 419-359-0592 or ac945515@ohio.edu. You may also contact my faulty advisor, Dr. Harold Perkins at 740-593-9896 or perkinsh@ohio.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, at 740-593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
- you are 18 years of age or older;
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
- you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please initial one of the following options:

______ I do give my permission for my name to be used in published materials or presentations.

______ I do not give my permission for my name to be used in published materials or presentations.

Signature __________________________________________ Date ______________________

Printed Name __________________________________________ Version Date: 04/27/2016
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background and Work

• Tell me about yourself (Age, Gender, Education, Home & Current town).
• How did you get started in this work? How long have you been doing it?
• What kinds of activities do you do regularly for your job?
• What are your personal motivations for your work?
• Do you hold any personal commitments or beliefs that affect your work?
• With what kinds of marketing do you engage? To what target audience?

Constraints

• Have you received tax breaks/grants/other financial incentives? What restrictions or dictates have they put on your work?
• Compare your goals with what you are able to accomplish. Where do they meet? Where are they different? Why do you think this is?
• What constrains your work or ability to meet goals (policies, programs, governmental or institutional)?
• Are there any policies or programs from which you benefit?
• Are there any policies or programs that you would like to see implemented or changed?

Local Food Systems

• What do you consider the benefits of a local food system?
• How do you contribute to the creation of a thriving local food system?
• How is your business/organization different from actors in the larger, non-local food system?

Food Security

• What do you see as the greatest need in this region related to food? Do you try to meet that need?

• Consider your audience. Whom do you not serve, or who does not have access to your products/services? Why do you think this is?

• In an ideal world, how would people access your products?

• What does food security mean to you?

• Do you feel a responsibility to contribute to food security for low-income people?

• Do you use any strategies to increase food access? Does anything hold you back?

Wrap-up

• Considering all the things we have talked about, where do you see the greatest possibilities for change?

• Is there anyone else with whom you suggest I speak?

• Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

• Do you have any questions for me?