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Review Article

Pathways, barriers, and contributions of older adults in the food justice movement: A narrative review

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Abstract

In North America, older adults are increasingly facing food insecurity and are among a rapidly growing group of emergency food users. While the food justice movement advocates for the "right to food" and equitable access within food systems, the contributions of older adults within this movement remain underexplored. This narrative review addresses this gap, synthesizing literature at the intersection of food system advocacy and aging. The findings reveal existing pathways, barriers, and opportunities for older adults in the food justice movement. The thematic analysis of relevant articles revealed three pathways of involvement for older adults: as cultural stewards sharing oral histories, as engaged citizens in food system governance, and as participants in alternative food networks that enhance access to food. Barriers to their engagement include differing conceptualizations of the "right to food," limited knowledge of food systems, self-perceived lack of agency, and structural constraints. The review also identifies opportunities for older adults to become involved in food justice, including intergenerational collaborations and participatory engagement in food governance. Recognizing the unique perspectives and experiences of older adults within food systems positions them as social change agents in the broader food justice movement, helping to address ageism and contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable food future.

Keywords: Community food systems; food justice; intergenerational; older adults; social justice

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Résumé

En Amérique du Nord, les personnes aînées, de plus en plus confrontées à l'insécurité alimentaire, constituent un groupe croissant d'utilisateurs de l'aide alimentaire d'urgence. Alors que le mouvement pour la justice alimentaire milite en faveur du « droit à l'alimentation » et d'un accès équitable aux systèmes alimentaires, la contribution des personnes aînées à ce mouvement reste peu étudiée. Cette revue narrative comble cette lacune en faisant la synthèse de la littérature autour de la défense du système alimentaire et du vieillissement. Les résultats font apparaître les voies qui existent, les obstacles et les opportunités pour les personnes aînées dans le mouvement pour la justice alimentaire. L'analyse thématique des articles pertinents a révélé trois voies d'implication pour les aînés et aînées : en tant que gardiens de la culture qui partagent des histoires oralement, en tant que citoyens engagés dans la gouvernance du système alimentaire et en tant que participants à des réseaux alimentaires parallèles qui améliorent l'accès à la nourriture. Les obstacles à leur engagement comprennent des idées différentes sur ce qu'est le « droit à l'alimentation », une connaissance limitée des systèmes alimentaires, un manque d'autonomie perçu et des contraintes structurelles. L'étude fait aussi ressortir les possibilités qu'ont les personnes âgées de s'impliquer dans la justice alimentaire, notamment par des collaborations intergénérationnelles et une participation active à la gouvernance alimentaire. La reconnaissance des perspectives et des expériences uniques des personnes aînées au sein des systèmes alimentaires permet d'en faire des agents de changement social dans le mouvement plus large de la justice alimentaire, contribuant ainsi à lutter contre l'âgisme et à bâtir un avenir alimentaire plus inclusif et durable.

Introduction

In North America, older adults are a growing group among emergency food users. In Canada, older adults have represented the fastest-growing demographic of food bank users since 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2022). In the U.S., about 7 percent of households with an older adult, and 7.2 percent of households with an older adult living alone, experienced food insecurity (Mavegam Tango Assoumou et al., 2023). Both Canadian and U.S. figures point to a worsening trend that has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic. Food insecurity occurs when an individual does not have adequate access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods (Mavegam Tango Assoumou et al., 2023; Government of Canada, 2010; Keller et al., 2007). Food insecurity has been considered an early indicator of poverty, as food is one of the first essential items that is sacrificed when managing limited financial budgets (Leroux et al., 2018). Rates of food insecurity are more prevalent among marginalized groups, which includes low-income and immigrant older adults, however this demographic is often overlooked in the discussion of food insecurity (Mavegam Tango Assoumou et al., 2023; Leroux et al., 2020).

The disparities in food security outcomes that disproportionately impact marginalized populations have led to social movements advocating for equitable access to food, such as the food justice movement. Advocates of the food justice movement seek to challenge the dominant industrial food system by

focussing on policy reform and structural changes to address food insecurity, striving for a collective vision of justice (Regnier-Davies, Edge, & Austin, 2022; Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). It is important to note the distinction between food justice and the more socially entrenched charitable approaches to alleviating food insecurity. This is because the increasing number of older adults accessing emergency food services often receive food through the predominant charitable model (e.g. food banks, food pantries, meal programs, etc.).

Food insecurity has historically been understood and treated as an issue of inadequate access to food. This framing of the problem has consequently elicited responses focussed on improving access to food for those with a demonstrable need. Despite the benefits offered to recipients of emergency food programs, the charitable response to food insecurity has been critiqued for its failure to address the root causes of food insecurity—namely poverty (Tarasuk et al., 2020; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003).

Food banks have been problematized for having little to no impact on household food insecurity and detracting needed attention from provincial and federal policy efforts (Collins et al., 2014; Regnier-Davies, Edge, & Austin, 2022; Tarasuk et al., 2020; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that food banks do not meet the needs of the individuals who frequent them, and that older adults underutilize these services due to the stigma of receiving food assistance (Aday et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al., 2014; Tims et al., 2021). Emergency food programs have been considered a symbolic act, deflecting responsibility from governmental action and failing to directly address the root causes of food insecurity (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003). While in recent years there has been a shift with some food banks adopting more dignified or community-oriented approaches to food distribution, these efforts continue to exist within a broader charitable model that dominates the food insecurity landscape.

Grassroots and non-profit community food organizations take an approach that is different than the charitable model, instead focussing on the importance of "a sustainable food system that maximizes community self reliance and social justice" (Collins et al., 2014, p. 139). This community food system approach removes emergency food access as the focal point of efforts to alleviate food insecurity, instead focussing on local leadership to drive social change and intentionally addressing the underlying systems and policies that contribute to food insecurity (Murray et al., 2023; Regnier-Davies, Edge, & Austin, 2022). The collective actions of community food organizations and individuals who advocate for just and sustainable food systems has come to be known broadly as the food movement (Wilson & Levkoe, 2022).

Food justice movement

The "food movement" has been described as a "movement of movements," encompassing a wide range of activities and engaging a diverse array of social actors (e.g., non-profit and charitable organizations) as well as food producers, consumers, small businesses, academics, and political representatives (Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). These actions and actors operate in different food systems that serve socially and economically diverse communities, often in response to local needs. Despite this diversity, overarching themes unite these movements, many of which are underpinned by a desire for food system reform and a rights-based commitment to ensuring food for all.

Existing frameworks within the broader food movement include food justice, food sovereignty, food security, food democracy, food citizenship, and others. While the boundaries between these concepts are fluid,

in this review we use the term "movement" broadly to capture actors and initiatives aligned with food system reform, regardless of specific terminology.

Within this broad terrain of food system reform, "*food justice*" has emerged as a galvanizing framework, distinct from other movements due to its alignment with social justice and advocacy. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) conceptualize food justice as both a goal and a process: "ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (p. 6). In their framing, food justice entails three arenas for action: 1) challenging and restructuring the dominant food system, 2) centering equity for historically marginalized populations, and 3) building linkages with other social justice activism (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. ix). Building on this, Murray and colleagues (2023, p. 4) similarly emphasize that food justice is rooted in "human rights, equal opportunity, fair treatment and is participatory and community-specific." Taken together, these definitions highlight both distributive concerns (access, wages, resources) and participatory concerns (agency, governance, empowerment) related to food justice (Loo, 2014; Murray et al., 2023).

To date, food justice activism has emphasized distributive inequalities, such as improved working conditions, fair compensation and providing equitable access to healthy food (Murray et al., 2023). While important, this approach overlooks the significance of participative disparities, which can contribute to the observed inequalities in distribution (Loo, 2014). A more participative conceptualization of food justice would see that vulnerable community members are empowered to participate in governance and decision making within food systems. This approach must also include the rapidly growing demographic of North American older adults facing food insecurity—a group that has been overlooked in current approaches to food justice in academic literature (Mavegam Tango Assoumou et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2023).

Efforts to theorize food justice have produced diverse interpretations, but with recurring points of convergence. A recent scoping review (Murray et al., 2023) identified five recurrent themes when conceptualizing food justice: 1) social equity, 2) food security, 3) food systems transformation, 4) community participation and agency, and 5) environmental sustainability. These themes map closely to Gottlieb and Joshi's three arenas for action, helping to outline "entry points for engagement" and extend understanding of food justice in diverse contexts.

Conceptualizations of food justice overlap with other related food system reform frameworks such as "food democracy" and "*food sovereignty,*" among others. For example, food sovereignty emphasizes the rights of food producers and their communities to define their own food systems, challenge industrial agriculture, and advance ecological and intergenerational equity (Wittman, 2011). While food sovereignty is distinct from food justice, the two share significant conceptual ground, particularly in their attention to equity, participation, and food system reform.

Given the conceptual overlaps, for this review we adopt an umbrella conceptualization of food justice that includes scholarship and practices aligned with its core justice-oriented principles, even when articulated through adjacent terms. In this framing, we acknowledge that not all activities in food movements (e.g., farmers' markets, community gardens) are inherently food justice; however, where the literature explicitly links these activities to rights-based or participatory initiatives**,** they may be aligned with food justice. Crucially, this umbrella framing recognizes that food justice has been conceptualized both in distributive terms and in participatory terms. Together, these complementary

approaches move food justice beyond charity toward structural reform.

Food justice rejects the dominant paradigm of food as a commodity and advances counter-hegemonic approaches such as "food as a commons," where food is viewed as a shared human resource (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Vivero-Pol, 2017). To attain this, Gottlieb and Joshi's propose a theory of change that draws explicitly on Antonio Gramsci's concept of a "war of position" (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 232). Gramsci argued that in capitalist societies the ruling class maintains control not only through force but by shaping beliefs and values, and to challenge that control the oppressed must engage in a long-term battle of ideas that transforms public consciousness, builds solidarity, and lays the groundwork for more direct collective action (Egan, 2014). Gottlieb and Joshi translate this into the food realm: the food movement should seek to shift public discourse through a counter-hegemonic language about food justice that will "lay the groundwork" for incremental political, institutional, economic, and policy change (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 232).

While the food justice literature has examined structural inequalities and discrimination related to race, class, gender, cultural politics, white privilege, historical trauma, and colonization (Murray et al., 2023), it has yet to engage with ageism and poverty within older adults. It is therefore worthwhile to consider older adults' perspectives not only because they are among the fastest-growing demographics experiencing food insecurity, but because their lived histories position them as valuable actors in this "war of position." Many older adults witnessed the shift from food as a shared cultural good to food as a market commodity and so carry narratives, practices, and place-based knowledge that can contest dominant framings (Koberinski et al., 2022; Neff et al., 2017; Neufeld & Richmond, 2020). In Gramscian terms, these perspectives and practices are resources for a counter-hegemonic discourse. Through meaningful participation in food justice initiatives, older adults can help reshape public understandings of food, acting as agents of change versus being considered as passive recipients of distributive efforts. The inclusion of their perspectives may help reconfigure the cultural terrain that precedes and enables structural reform of food justice. Further to this, older adults are often treated as a homogenous and passive demographic, rarely positioned as participants in social movements. Recognizing their potential to engage in food justice therefore challenges broader societal norms about aging while contributing to food systems change. In this way, advancing older adults' participation in food justice represents a dual opportunity: to expand the scope of justice-oriented food system reform and to disrupt ageist narratives that may limit the agency and contributions of older people.

Methodology and methods

A narrative review was chosen as the most suitable approach for this review to provide a comprehensive perspective on an area with limited published literature. Narrative reviews are useful in exploring under researched areas of the literature as they can provide insights on advancing the field (Sukhera, 2022). Given the wide array of activities and movements associated with food justice, a narrative review has the ability to track the development of a concept, whereas the restrictions of a systematic review may lose the overall

narrative of the phenomenon in question (Ferrari, 2015). This narrative review uses systematic methodologies to reduce bias, as outlined by Ferrari (2015), to link theoretical frameworks with real-world context, fostering academic discourse and encouraging further research.

The objective of this review was to examine the existing role and presence of older adults within the food justice movement. The initial focus was on literature specifically addressing older adults' involvement specifically in food justice, but limited results necessitated a broader conceptualization of food justice as outlined in the introduction as well as the following inclusion and exclusion criteria section of this paper. The search strategy for this review was international, however the included articles are geographically skewed toward North America (Canada and the United States), findings are interpreted primarily in relation to North American policy and service contexts with international examples for additional insight. Country of study for each included article is reported in Table 2.

For the purposes of this review, "older adults" were defined as individuals aged sixty years and older. This aligns with the World Health Organization convention, which uses sixty years and older as the threshold in global aging research (Beard et al., 2015; World Health Organization, 2002). While definitions of "older adults" vary across disciplines and policy contexts (often ranging from fifty-five and up to sixty-five and up), we adopted sixty years as an internationally recognized benchmark.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To adequately capture scholarship addressing justice-oriented food system reform at the intersection of aging, we adopted an expanded conceptualization of "food justice" that used Gottlieb & Joshi's (2010) three arenas of action as the primary screening framework and Murray et al. (2023) to refine thematic relevance. Specifically, studies were retained if they explicitly used the term "food justice" or substantively engaged with at least one of Gottlieb & Joshi's arenas: (1) challenge and restructure dominant food systems; (2) centre equity and disparities, particularly among vulnerable populations; or (3) link food system reform to broader social justice advocacy. Studies passing this threshold were then mapped to Murray et al.'s five thematic domains (social equity; food security; food systems transformation; community participation and agency; environmental sustainability) to classify how justice was enacted in practice.

This approach also allowed inclusion of overlapping terminology (e.g., food sovereignty, alternative food networks, food advocacy) and acknowledges that, in both literature and practice, the boundaries of "food justice" may be fluid. For transparency, included studies were mapped to both Gottlieb & Joshi's arenas and Murray and colleagues' thematic domains, with results presented in Table 2. Studies were excluded if they focussed exclusively on technical, nutritional, or production aspects of food systems without consideration of justice, equity, or participation. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are detailed in Table 1.

Identification and selection of relevant studies

The primary researcher independently conducted an initial literature search across multiple databases, including Web of Science, PubMed, JSTOR, AgeLine, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined relevant keywords and terms: ("Older adults" OR "Seniors" OR "Elderly" OR "Aging population" OR "Gerontology") AND ("Food justice movement" OR "Food activism" OR "Food equity" OR "Food sovereignty" OR "Community food security" OR "Food policy" OR "Food systems").

The initial search identified 1,090 records across Web of Science, PubMed, JSTOR, AgeLine, and Google Scholar. To augment the database search, a manual review of reference lists from relevant articles was conducted by the researcher to address potential evidence gaps (Ferrari, 2015). Google Scholar generated a very large number of results due to the inclusion of multiple versions of publications (e.g., institutional repository, publisher PDF, pre-print), as well as full dissertations and non-peer-reviewed materials. As such, the first round of screening conducted by the primary author involved removal of exclusion of clearly irrelevant records (e.g., food microbiology, nutrition interventions, or food consumption studies without any justice or equity orientation) and duplicates. This step reduced the sample to ninety-three records.

In the second stage the remaining articles were imported into Covidence software for further organization and analysis. Article abstracts were reviewed for methodology, study characteristics, participant demographics, and findings, which included both quantitative results and qualitative themes and were assessed for alignment with the review's focus on older adults and food justice. Ninety-three articles underwent an abstract scan, with sixty proceeding to a full-text review. Exclusion criteria at this stage were applied to studies due to 1) population relevance (n=9), where older adults were absent or only incidental to the analysis, 2) wrong study design (n=9), where the design did not include substantive engagement with food systems or justice/equity concerns, or 3) wrong outcomes (n=28), were the outcomes focussed exclusively on distributive relief (e.g., emergency food programs, nutrition, etc.) without connecting to food system reform or social justice. Following this stage, fourteen studies remained for full narrative analysis. The time frame was limited to publications from 2004 onward, stemming from Murray and colleague's recent scoping review on the conceptualizations of food justice where the authors noted that "the majority of food justice studies" occurred after 2004 with a fourfold increase year-over-year in the terms usage since 2015 (Murray et al., 2023). See Figure 1 for PRISMA diagram.

It is important to note that much of the existing scholarship at the intersection of food and aging focusses on food access, food insecurity determinants, and interventions, and biomedical or nutritional dimensions of health and longevity. Despite the use of justice-related search terms, a significant proportion of results reflected these themes rather than substantive engagement with justice, equity, or participatory food system reform. This helps to explain the large reduction from the initial 1,090 records to the final fourteen included studies. and highlights the relative scarcity of justice-oriented research involving older adults. While fourteen articles may seem modest in number, this reflects the emergent state of scholarship at the intersection of aging and justice-oriented food systems research, highlighting the contribution of this review in mapping an underexplored domain.

The selected articles were imported into MAXQDA, where they underwent a process of coding and thematic analysis to identify main themes and

concepts as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding evolved iteratively, with conceptual themes and noteworthy insights emerging around older adults' involvement in food justice and the barriers and opportunities that face in enacting food system reform.

Results and discussion

The included articles were published between 2007 and 2024, with most appearing in the past five years, reflecting the growing scholarly interest at the intersection of food justice and aging. The United States accounted for the largest share of studies (n=6), followed by Canada (n=2), the United Kingdom (n=2), and single studies from Austria, New Zealand, India, and Australia.

The conceptualization of food justice in this review looked beyond the single term "food justice," to include complementary frameworks related to food system reform that emphasized rights, equity, and the participation of older adults. The literature revealed adjacent terminology such as: "food sovereignty" (Wehi et al., 2023), "food citizenship" (Tuckett et al., 2022), "repeasantization" (Korzenszky, 2019), "alternative food systems" (Tims et al., 2021) and the "right to food" (Brady et al., 2023). Older adults' involvement was also captured through their participation in activities associated with alternative food networks, which include activities such as gardening, farmer's markets, and community supported agriculture (Levkoe, 2006; Sprague & Kennedy, 2016), which are not explicitly related to food justice, however, if these activities are aimed at the reformation of the dominant food system, or support the rights, equal participation and inclusion of older adults, then can they may be considered to be supportive of food justice efforts (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010).

Given the diverse conceptualizations and terminologies related to food justice, each included article is mapped to the conceptual arenas for action and engagement with food justice as articulated by Gottlieb and Joshi as well as the thematic dimensions food justice outlined by Murray and colleagues (See Table 1).

The thematic analysis of the articles included in this narrative review identified three overarching themes: 1) the current pathways for involvement of older adults in food justice; 2) existing barriers to participation of older adults in food justice; and 3) opportunities for the involvement of older adults in food justice. Subthemes were also identified within the broader themes. While most subthemes were supported across multiple studies, a few findings appeared in only a single article. These are presented not as themes but as insights, as they raise conceptually important considerations and highlight gaps for future research. Examples include discussions of the right to food and experiences of limited agency. In the following section, insights are explicitly marked as such, whereas unmarked sections represent themes supported by multiple studies. Insights should therefore be read as promising directions for further inquiry rather than well established patterns in the literature.

Current involvement and pathways for older adults in food justice

The involvement of older adults in the food justice movement is a novel concept in the academic literature. Despite this, this review identified several ways older adults have been involved in activities related to food justice, namely through knowledge translation and cultural traditions; community engagement in governance and access to land and food.

Intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer

The first pathway for the involvement of older adults is through knowledge translation and the continuation of cultural traditions (Demientieff et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2024; Wehi et al., 2023). In certain Indigenous cultures, older adults are active participants in events that emphasize community, unity, and cultural resilience (Demientieff et al., 2023; Wehi et al., 2023). Cultural events represent an opportunity for older adults to play an essential role in upholding traditions through their contributions to food preparation, service, and mentorship of younger generations (Neufeld & Richmond, 2020; Wehi et al., 2023). These events are gatherings that serve as opportunities for "cultural autonomy" through expression but also serve as platforms for intergenerational learning and social cohesion (Demientieff et al., 2023; Wehi et al., 2023). The engagement of older adults in these cultural events helps to reinforce their social position by maintaining and adapting cultural practices within the existing food system (Wehi, 2023). Older adults play a role in helping "re-envision food systems" through strong social networks and intergenerational connections that are developed and fostered as a result of these cultural events (Wehi et al., 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, the continuation of cultural traditions also represent sites for "empowering" elders, adding to knowledge about traditional foodways that may have been lost due to colonization (Demientieff et al., 2023). This restorative role is particularly important given the structural impacts of environmental dispossession and cultural loss attributed to colonization (Neufeld & Richmond, 2020). Elders' participation ensures that food is framed not only as nourishment, but also as a collective right tied to land, identity, and resilience. This lens moves the participation of older adults beyond questions of food access and into participatory system reform, aimed at advancing equity for historically marginalized communities. Maintenance of this traditional knowledge enforces "cultural autonomy," (Wehi et al., 2023, p. 6) representing both an existing and future pathway for older adult involvement in practices that support community food sovereignty and access to food, principles that are aligned with the concept of food justice (Murray et al., 2023).

Community engagement in governance and research

Older adults are also engaged in food system reform through collaborations between community-based service organizations and academic institutions (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022; Tuckett et al., 2022). Projects that are aimed at supporting participatory food system governance involve older adults as actively engaged citizens within their communities (Tuckett et al., 2022). Collaborations between community organizations and academic institutions that seek to evaluate and improve local food security initiatives have intentionally involved older adults and requested their input (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022; Tuckett et al., 2022). The aim of this approach is to have the lived experiences of citizens impacted by food insecurity, namely older adults, shape and underpin

recommendations and initiatives aimed at improving food security programs and advocacy efforts (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022; Tuckett et al., 2022). Tuckett and colleagues (2022) employed a "citizen science approach that empowers older adults as active change agents" (p.9), ensuring that their voices and experiences were integral to the development of food security programs that serve the local community—both at programmatic and policy levels. The development of initiatives such as Food Train, a program that "was developed by older people, for older people and is driven by the lived experience of its older members," exemplifies how older adults can drive community-based solutions that address the specific challenges faced by their demographic (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022, p. 393). Such instances of engagement centre on the importance of participatory engagement and represent a pathway towards food system reform whereby individuals have a say in the governance of the social systems that enable or constrain their choices (Levkoe, 2006; Thompson et al., 2020; Tuckett et al., 2022). Community agencies and academic institutions have championed the inclusion of the perspectives of older adults, and such collaborations that foster their participation have led to policy changes at the national level in the United Kingdom (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022).

The engagement of older adults through participatory approaches can also be extended into academic research on food system reform. Neufeld and Richmond (2020) demonstrate this by integrating Elder women into the research process using a community-engaged methodology. Their approach not only upheld Indigenous data sovereignty but also actively involved community members in shaping the analysis. Participants reviewed their own transcripts to ensure accuracy and contributed to the development of the analytical framework, with discussions taking place in inclusive, community-oriented settings such as a potluck. This methodology highlights how academic research can be participative for older adults to respectfully include their knowledge and perspectives.

Access to land and food

Another pathway in which older adults are involved in food system reform is their role in reshaping norms of access to land and to food. As noted by Neufeld and Richmond (2020), "for Indigenous Peoples, the right to food is linked to land access and is formulated as a collective right" (p. 8). This perspective situates land-related interventions within a food justice frame as it relates to advancing collective rights and fostering participation. In some contexts, elders contribute to land-linked justice primarily through knowledge transmission, stewardship, and community leadership, rather than through formal land transactions. Their perspectives can contribute towards a shift in the narratives regarding understanding land ownership. Through interviews with Elders, two of the review articles found that Elders teaching younger generations helps in preserving cultural traditions, including the perspective of food as a collective good—a perspective that is counter to the perspective of the dominant food system (Neufeld & Richmond, 2020; Wehi et al., 2023). While these activities do not include the direct transfer of legal land titles or creating new land-access programs, it does show the potential for the lived experiences and leadership of older adults in forming a practical foundation for rights-based and participatory interventions that align with Gottlieb & Joshi's theory of change.

In the review of the literature, some older adults played a role in facilitating access to land for younger generations who are interested in farming. This was achieved through the process of extrafamilial farm

succession, which is "the transmission of a farm between non-kin" (Korzenszky, 2019, p. 291). The process involves a partnership between young aspiring farmers and older farmers who are looking for successors to take on their existing farming operation. This alternative method of land-transfer provides an opportunity to resist the shifts towards an "increasingly globalized, concentrated, industrialized and science-intense" food system (Korzenszky, 2019, p. 292). While such agreements help to limit the shift towards corporatization of agricultural land, this practice of land transfer does not automatically support food justice. In these instances of intergenerational cooperation, older adults play a central role in this exchange, providing access to "ecological capital" in the form of land while also transferring "invaluable" knowledge that older farmers have "have collected from their ancestors, in some cases for centuries" (Korzenszky, 2019, p. 304). The access to resources that older adults have are transferred to younger generations through cooperation and partnership, which in some cases may help to remove the direct need for financial capital that can be prohibitive for aspiring young farmers entering agriculture, therefore helping facilitate access to land. This said, succession may reproduce existing inequalities unless it is intentionally structured to prioritize equitable access, participation, and long-term stewardship. Where succession explicitly reduces barriers for under resourced entrants, or includes knowledge sharing and participatory governance, it can be understood as a justice-aligned pathway, however if it functions primarily as private asset transfer, it is more likely an agricultural practice with limited justice impact. Additionally, we did not find published reports of similar models in contexts outside of this paper, which was situated in Austria, possibly speaking to the limits on the potential applicability of this pathway.

Older adults' participation in alternative food networks (AFNs) provides them with opportunities to gain more equitable access to food and engage in participatory initiatives that contribute to food system reform (Lim et al., 2024). Initiatives such as farmer's markets, backyard gardens, community gardens, and community supported agriculture (Martínez & Salazar, 2020; Tims et al., 2021) represent sites where the ethos of food justice may be actualized (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Sprague & Kennedy, 2016). While these sites may be useful in addressing issues relating to equitable access to food, they remain heterogenous and contested. Farmers' markets and CSAs may increase access for some while remaining unaffordable or exclusionary for others. Where AFNs incorporate subsidy programs, inclusive governance, or participatory practices targeting marginalized groups, they provide both distributive and participatory benefits, shifting from access alone toward civic engagement and agency. Lim and colleagues (2024) identified farmer's markets as potential sites capable of addressing issues relevant older adults and being a locus of civic engagement where older adults can learn and contribute to social change initiatives in their communities.

Barriers to involvement of older adults in food justice

Despite the pathways for older adult involvement in food justice, there are elements that can also hinder their participation. These barriers range from physical barriers to socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

Insight: Conceptualizations of "right to food" and individual responsibility

One significant barrier to involvement stems from how older adults conceptualize the principal ethos of the

food justice movement: the "right to food." Some older adults do not align their views with theoretical understandings of access to food as being a human right (Brady et al., 2023). Instead, they often perceive food access as a matter of personal and individual responsibility (Brady et al., 2022, 2023). In their interviews with older adults discussing "the right to food," Brady and colleagues (2023) note that older adults believed that the necessary resources to enable adequate food access for individuals are "already available through government programs and emergency food providers," and those who lack access should seek out these resources (p. 173). So, these older adults frame inadequate access to food as an individual choice versus pointing to systemic issues as constraints to food access. The difference in conceptualization is further cemented by the view that inadequate access to healthy food is an "unchangeable reality" (Brady et al., 2023, p. 176). This perspective runs counter to the principles of food citizenship and food justice that aim to provide equitable access to healthy food through collective action (Brady et al., 2023; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Thompson et al., 2020).

The difference in the conceptualization of the right to food that is held by some older adults represents a perspective that shifts the focus of the causes of food insecurity away from structural inequalities towards individual choices. This difference in perspective creates a barrier to the involvement of older adults in food justice because they do not necessarily consider food justice initiatives as a necessity to address inequities in the food system. When the ability to access adequate amounts of food is framed as a personal responsibility rather than a systemic issue, the impetus for older adults to engage in broader food justice initiatives diminishes, as they may not perceive a need for systemic change. It is important to note that the findings from Brady and colleagues (2022, 2023) come from a limited sample that was "predominantly White and female" (p.176). The sample did not include any Hispanic participants or people receiving forms of food assistance, as such the perspectives on the right to food are limited and may not be representative of all older adults or individuals facing issues related to food insecurity (Brady et al., 2022, 2023).

Insight: Knowledge of food system structures

In addition to the differing perspectives on the right to food, an additional barrier reported by Brady and colleagues (2022) is the lack of knowledge that older adults have about food system structures. The authors highlight that even when older adults feel a sense of responsibility towards food justice, they "often lack the information required" to become involved in advocacy efforts (Brady et al., 2022, p. 580). This gap in knowledge prevents older adults from acting as "food citizens" who actively participate in shaping a just food system (Brady et al., 2022). The gap in understanding the complexities of the current food system limits the involvement of older adults in food justice movements. This barrier to engagement leads to a form of disengagement from the drive of the movement because of a lack of information relating to how the food system operates and the existing pathways to make change. The lack of knowledge related to food systems combined with older adults' differing perspectives of the principles underlying the food justice movement both act as barriers that diminish older adults' motivation to act towards food justice.

Insight: Self-perceived lack of control

Even if older adults are aware that change is needed, there is a self-perceived lack of control or agency within the food system that acts as a barrier to their

involvement. Older adults often feel that they have "relatively little control" over the food they eat and the broader food environment, including potential hazards in foods, such as pesticides (Neff et al., 2017, p. 61). This perceived lack of control can lead to a sense of powerlessness that results in disengagement in food advocacy efforts—even if there is a feeling that change is needed. The lack of control points to feelings of limited capacity to make change, and therefore a need for greater agency, a key component in driving the work food justice (Clapp et al., 2022). A limited sense of agency could be a significant barrier to the involvement of older adults in food justice, as it reduces motivation to engage in social action because their efforts may seem futile, and future outcomes are beyond one's control.

Infrastructure barriers

Infrastructure barriers also play a role in limiting older adults' involvement in food justice activities. Transportation, health status changes, and neighborhood cohesion significantly influence social participation among older adults. This is especially the case in those with mobility challenges, those living in rural areas or with limited access to reliable transportation (Lim et al., 2024; Neff et al., 2017). These factors can restrict the ability to participate in community-based food justice activities. In some cases, these barriers are in opposition to older adults' intrinsic desire to participate in community activities. For example, Lim and colleagues (2024) found that some older adults who wanted to attend their local farmer's market were unable to do so due to limited transportation options. The lack of supportive infrastructure for adequate transportation and a lack of programming that addresses the transportation barriers, especially for rural older adults, creates barriers to accessing programs related to food justice These barriers can be mitigated when older adults have access to a strong social support network (e.g. family and friends), which provides opportunities to access carpooling and assistance grocery shopping, thereby facilitating participation in community-based activities (Kansanga et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2024).

Opportunities for involvement of older adults in food justice

The literature review highlights opportunities at the intersection of pathways and barriers for older adults to engage in the food justice movement. Neff et al. (2017) note that older adults' priorities regarding their local food system "dovetail with many of the priorities embraced by food system reform advocates" (p.61), underscoring potential for their increased involvement in food justice efforts.

Intergenerational collaborations—knowledge transfer

One significant opportunity for deepening the involvement of older adults in food justice is through fostering intergenerational connections and collaborations. These connections are an initial theme in this research, highlighting older adults' current involvement, but they also offer an opportunity to extend their engagement in food justice. Transferring knowledge from one generation to the next has been considered a form of social capital that may help provide advantages to younger generations beginning careers in agriculture (Korzenszky, 2019). These cross-generational collaborations are especially valuable to food sovereignty in Indigenous communities, where knowledge transmission of knowledge sustains cultural foodways and autonomy—challenging existing food system norms (Demientieff et al., 2023; Wehi et al.,

2023). Within this context, "food sovereignty has been the domain of women, who have led movements aimed at both social and environmental justice" (Neufeld & Richmond, 2020, p. 1). Yet, as Neufeld and Richmond (2020) note, colonialism has contributed to the undervaluing of women's perspectives, they therefore assert that to attain Indigenous food sovereignty, these underrepresented voices need to be heard. This is especially true in seeking to understand the impacts of historical events, social changes and ecological shifts that have occurred in their lifetimes and impacted Indigenous foodways. Intergenerational collaborations thus represent an important mechanism for amplifying the practices and perspectives of female Elders and positioning them as central actors in food system reform. As discussed earlier, the inclusion of Elder perspectives can help to reshape dominant framings of food as a commodity by advancing Indigenous understandings of "food as a commons."

The opportunity is to create intentional, structured collaboration—such as mentorship programs, co-designed community food initiatives, and intergenerational governance—to allow younger and older generations, especially women Elders, to jointly challenge inequities, share alternative food values, and co-create just food futures. The intention behind these collaborations should uphold the principles of food justice, where efforts are aimed at attaining food system reform, equity for marginalized groups and linking the outputs to other forms of advocacy (e.g. environmental sustainability). By participating in these intergenerational collaboratives, older adults not only contribute to the sustainability of food systems but also help advance food justice efforts (Murray et al., 2023).

The different understandings that older adults have on the "right to food," as noted by Brady and colleagues (2022), also represents an opportunity for intergenerational collaboration. While some older adults frame food access primarily as an issue of personal responsibility rather than structural inequality, this difference can open space for dialogue across generations about the underlying drivers of food insecurity and the importance of justice-oriented solutions. Similarly, the lack of knowledge some older adults report having about food system structures (Brady et al., 2022) highlights a further opportunity: creating intentional intergenerational spaces where younger generations engaged in food justice activism can share knowledge about food systems and advocacy pathways, while older adults contribute lived experience and cultural traditions. Together, these collaborations could bridge gaps in understanding, foster mutual learning, and cultivate a shared commitment to advancing food justice.

Participatory engagement and citizen science

Participatory governance methods offer older adults a democratic way to engage in food justice by intentionally incorporating the perspectives of the people served by programs and policies (Levkoe, 2006; Thompson et al., 2020). The benefit and opportunity in taking a participatory governance approach, such as citizen science, is that it allows for alternative forms of engagement and collection of feedback that may be more accessible to community members (Tuckett et al., 2022). Approaches such as photovoice, focus groups, interviews, participatory mapping and digital storytelling (Jull et al., 2017) represent non-traditional forms of engagement that may be used within research on food systems governance, while also serving as participatory practices that support governance processes themselves. These methods can be more accessible to older adults, therefore providing new ways to involve this population in actively participating in reshaping food systems (Jull et al., 2017; Tuckett et al.,

2022). Tuckett and colleagues (2022) emphasize the importance of using citizen science to empower older adults, enabling them to highlight issues important to them and advocate for change.

In addition to ensuring voices of older adults are considered in governance, participatory research methods also help to provide community members with more clarity on existing issues within the current food system (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022). Their participation creates an opportunity for older adults to learn about civic issues, build their awareness of gaps in the existing food system and allows people to make more informed decisions as active citizens (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022; Tuckett et al., 2022). By involving older adults in these initiatives, the food justice movement can benefit from their insights and experiences, while also addressing the barriers they face, such as a lack of knowledge about existing food systems. It has also been suggested that older adults' involvement in citizen-engaged forms of governance can contribute to physical wellbeing and provide opportunities for "social participation and connectedness" (Tuckett et al., 2022, p. 3).

Overall, participatory engagement methods help bridge the gap between research and governance by ensuring that the needs and perspectives of older adults are incorporated not only into studies about food systems reform but also into the decision making processes that shape them. This dual function democratizes the process of food systems change, empowering participants while fostering a sense of agency and ownership among older adults, thereby providing opportunities to become active participants in food justice rather than passive beneficiaries (Jull et al., 2017; Levkoe, 2006; Murray et al., 2023b; Thompson et al., 2020).

Strategic partnerships and policy influence

To increase the likelihood of the success of the participatory governance approaches discussed, strategic partnerships between government, academic, and community organizations are critical (Tuckett et al., 2022). Without strategic partnerships to champion citizens' insights, policy formation risks becoming "siloed" from citizens' lived realities (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022, p. 396). Failing to incorporate citizen perspectives in food policy has been criticized in the literature and considered to be an approach that overlooks the true needs of those facing food insecurity (Levkoe, 2006; Murray et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2020). Conversely, an approach that favours partnerships that include academic, governmental, and community-serving organizations can help lead to an "interconnected approach" that benefits the whole food system (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022, p. 396). Such partnerships can serve to incorporate and direct the perspectives of older adults in the implementation of novel programs and policy solutions related to food system governance (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022; Tuckett et al., 2022).

Simply including the perspectives of older adults in academic research is not sufficient to make impactful changes in the food justice movement. Government and community partnerships must work in concert to translate the findings of academic study into social policy making and the implementation of community-directed programs (Regnier-Davies, Edge, Yu, et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2020). Partnerships between government and social service agencies also help to alleviate the stresses that can be imposed on communities dealing with issues of food insecurity (Wehi et al., 2023). Participation in these collaborations represents an opportunity for older adults to share their lived experiences and knowledge to inform policy

creation and implementation, ensuring that food justice initiatives are both inclusive and effective.

Limitations

Due to the diverse and evolving nature of the food justice movement, the literature search revealed considerable variation in terminology across citizen-driven food system reform efforts (e.g., food justice, food sovereignty, food citizenship, etc.). Rather than focussing on these distinctions, this review adopts an umbrella conceptualization of food justice which incorporates these activities collectively to understand the role of older adults in food-system reform focussed on equity and human rights. This said, the review yielded a small number of articles, reflecting the emerging nature of scholarship at the intersection of aging and food justice. This highlights the contribution of this review in mapping an underexplored domain and setting a foundation for future research. We excluded grey literature to maintain rigor and comparability across studies, focussing only on peer-reviewed work. A limitation of this approach is that practice-based engagement of older adults in food systems may be unrecorded or fall outside of academic publishing, representing an important gap for future research.

Additionally, much of the existing literature on older adults within food systems primarily addresses the experiences of older adults facing food insecurity. Rather than focussing on these perspectives, which are a downstream effect of systemic issues within the industrial food complex (Collins et al., 2014), this review instead focusses on efforts towards structural reform of the food system rather than charitable food programs, as these have been critiqued as failing to address the root causes of food insecurity (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Levkoe, 2011). Finally, due to the exploratory nature of this review, insufficient literature was available on the gendered aspects food and older adults' involvement in food justice and as such this was not examined. Future research should take an intersectional approach, considering not only gender but also race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and other social locations, to further inform our understanding of older adults' specific contributions to the movement.

Conclusions and implications

Drawing on Gottlieb and Joshi's (2010) Gramscian framing, we suggest that the participation of older adults should be understood not only in terms of distributive outcomes but also as part of a broader "war of position," where shifting narratives and public discourse precede structural change. Older adults' perspectives, informed by lived histories of food, land, and community, can serve as a counter-hegemonic resource that challenges the dominant paradigms that commodify food—reasserting the perspective of food as a right and a common good. Recognizing and mobilizing this role positions older adults as

contributors to the conceptual, participatory and policy foundations of food justice.

Older adults' experiences span the historical transformation of the food system from small-scale farming to corporatization (Neff et al., 2017). This narrative review synthesizes how their unique perspectives, informed by earlier agricultural traditions, both align with and diverge from modern food advocacy movements. Their lived experiences, informed by practices linked to "peasant agriculture," have served as models for modern day advocacy efforts, such as *La Via Campesina*, which seeks food sovereignty through supporting local agriculture (Korzenszky, 2019; Thompson et al., 2020; Vivero-Pol, 2017; Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). Older adults that have experienced alternative food systems therefore hold perspectives that may serve to support the priorities being championed by modern food system reform advocates, highlighting the potential for collaboration (Neff, 2017).

While there is overlap in values, this review also demonstrated a divergence. One of the highlighted barriers was the misalignment in views on the right to food, where some older adults viewed existing food access programs as sufficient while also considering the status quo as "unchangeable," thus running counter to the rights-based logic of food justice (Brady et al., 2022, 2023). Compounding this, some older adults reported limited knowledge of food-system structures and advocacy, as well as a self-perceived lack of agency that discourages engagement (Brady et al., 2022; Neff et al., 2017; Clapp et al., 2022). Mobilizing older adults will therefore require more than simple invitation, it demands creating shared understandings, targeted knowledge building, and agency enhancing interventions. As these barriers were reported by a small, non-representative sample, future research must use more diverse populations to fully understand the barriers and evaluate approaches that translate elders' experiential knowledge into sustained, justice-oriented participation.

An identified pathway to address this barrier is intergenerational collaboration—where older adults may contribute valuable social and ecological capital to the food justice movement. Cross-generational partnerships serve to strengthen community resilience, reinforce cultural autonomy, and support local food sovereignty (Demientieff et al., 2023; Wehi et al., 2023). Supported by community organizations, these collaborations can also help to mitigate the barriers older adults face in terms of becoming involved in food justice activities. For example, regarding the perceived lack of agency, community food organizations represent spaces where food justice advocacy can be actualized and, through intergenerational connections, older adults can become active citizens, thereby building their agency and food system knowledge (Regnier-Davies, Edge, & Austin, 2022).

Participatory governance research offers another avenue for meaningful engagement. Supported by partnerships with government, academia, and civil society, these models provide platforms for older adults to contribute directly to food systems decision making (Tuckett et al., 2022). The democratization of the advocacy process allows older adults to exercise agency in governance and decision making while fostering a sense of connectedness and purpose (Jull et al., 2017; Levkoe, 2006; Thompson et al., 2020). Collaboration between organizations have been influential in shaping national level policies, including integrating the "right to food" into law in Scotland, as an example (Robinson-Miles et al., 2022). Conversely, "top down" approaches to policy neglect the perspectives of the people they are meant to serve, working counter to food justice principles (Singh et al., 2013).

Together, these pathways highlight the potential for older adults to participate in and shape inclusive and

sustainable food systems. Incorporating their perspectives using a participative approach can serve to empower older adults to act as social change agents and concomitantly contributing towards achieving the long-term goals, strategies, and outcomes of food justice (Loo, 2014; Murray et al., 2023; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022).

Given the prevalence of ageism, participatory approaches that are inclusive of older adults are particularly cogent (Harbison, 2015). The meaningful inclusion of older adults would represent working towards a society that values the diverse perspectives, worldviews and lived experiences of all its members. Both the fields of critical gerontology and food justice point to the value of multidisciplinary collaboration to strengthen each social movement and deepen impact (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Katz, 1996; Loo, 2014; Murray et al., 2023; Phillipson, 2006).

Older adults, with their rich repositories of historical and ancestral knowledge, are positioned to contribute to the re-evaluation of current food systems and the re-establishment of connections to food and land. Acknowledging and investing in their role is essential in realizing transformative change towards a healthier, more just, and sustainable food future—for all.

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