



# Bridging Food Access and Food Justice Initiatives: A Pilot Study with a California Home Gardening Program and Food Pantry

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## Introduction:

Food insecurity is a “lack of access to food needed for an active, healthy life” and it’s prevalent even in “wealthy” or “developed” neighborhoods (Horst, 2017). This study’s location offers a prime example: Silicon Valley is home to technology giants like Hewlett-Packard, Apple, Google, and Facebook, and neighborhoods like Menlo Park boast mean household incomes of nearly \$241,000 (Farivar, 2020). But while these technology company’s profits soar into the billions, “demand for free groceries has quadrupled” (Farivar, 2020). Direct food distribution may alleviate community members’ immediate food insecurity, but it ignores—and even directly contradicts—community members’ deeper desire for food sovereignty, in which they may produce, distribute, and consume culturally-relevant and healthy food. This community-based research project aims to integrate direct food distribution and urban gardening programs to improve the sustainability of emergency food assistance, creating a system that facilitates food sovereignty long-term, while alleviating immediate hunger. We partnered with Sacred Heart Community Services (SHCS)—an enormous essential services provider in Santa Clara County—and the La Mesa Verde Urban Gardening Program to co-create a food justice approach to emergency food assistance.

## Research Questions:

1. How can the Sacred Heart Community Services’ Food Pantry and La Mesa Verde program collaborate to address issues of food security and food justice?
2. What are examples of how efforts to link food assistance and food justice initiatives have met this challenge prior to and during COVID-19?
3. Determine the true quantity of food waste within the Pantry and identify alternative opportunities to emphasize the sustainability and food justice missions of the organization.

## Methods:

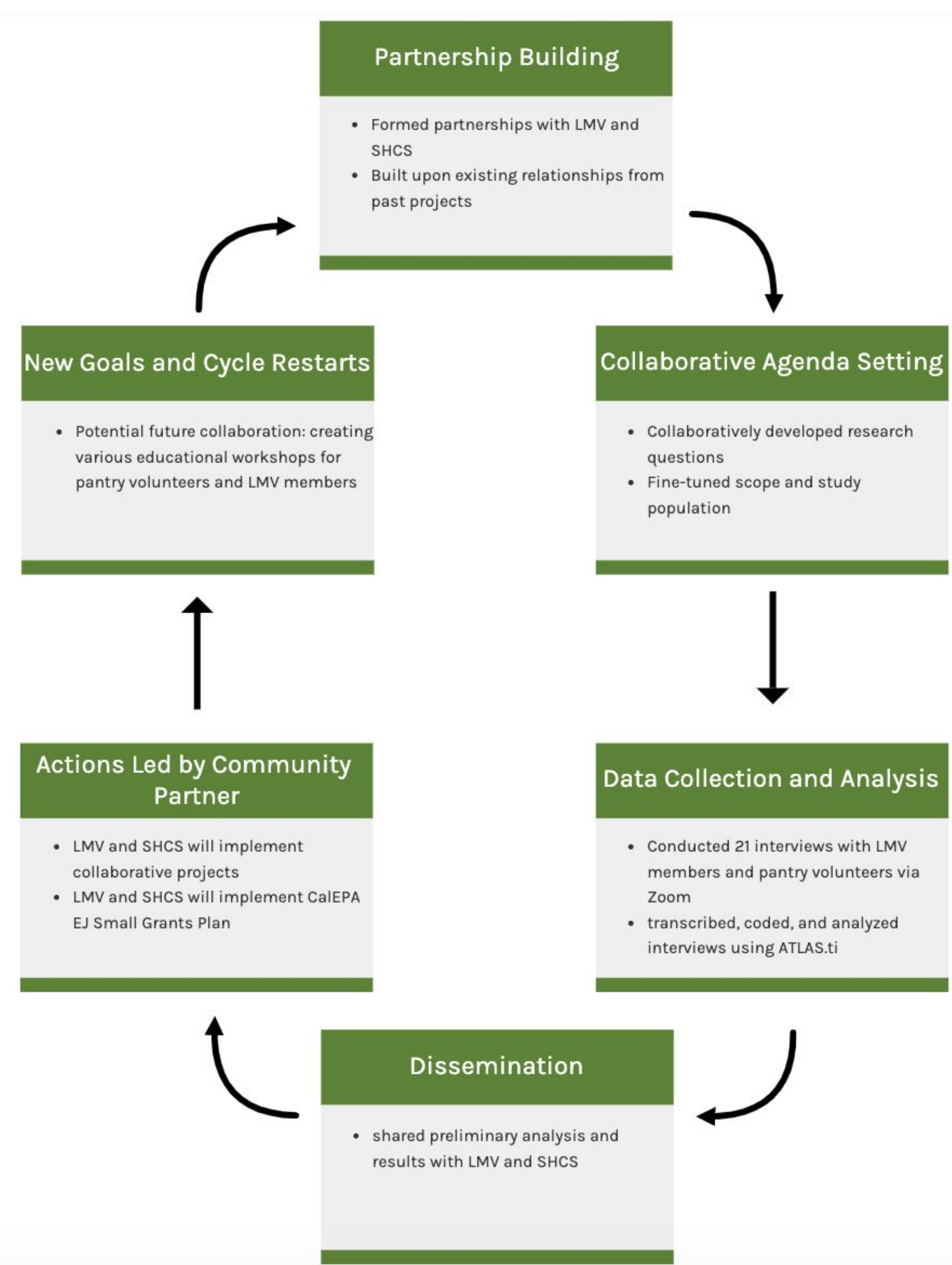


Figure 1: The figure illustrates the cyclical nature of a community-based participatory action research project (CB-PAR).

## Findings:

### Food Justice Definition:

- Pantry Volunteers and LMV Members agree on access to good quality food
  - LMV Members more likely to consider food justice a right
- Pantry Volunteers (all but one) unclear/unfamiliar with food justice
- LMV Members’ responses more nuanced and personal
  - Focus on space to grow food as a part of food justice, food as a *right*
- 2 Pantry Volunteers mentioned farm worker rights

*“But, that doesn't necessarily mean that they have to have filet mignon every day, but it does mean they should have sufficient food to meet basic nutritional needs and hopefully have something that is enjoyable once in a while.”*  
- Pantry Volunteer

*“Food justice would be [that] we could all have the opportunity to grow our own vegetables. That we wouldn't have to go hungry or lack vegetables at our table. If we have food justice, we would always have organic vegetables and fruits from our own gardens.”*  
- LMV Member

### Best Experience:

- 2 primary responses: (1) receiving/giving goods and (2) the sense of community that SHCS offers
- Pantry Volunteers build/experience community on an individual level
  - connecting with both volunteers and clients
- LMV Members build/experience community through collective action
  - Kids’ Club, sharing/receiving produce, building gardens
- Key takeaway is the role of community building

*“My best experience volunteering in the Pantry... uh has nothing to do with food actually. My best experience was that I was able to work with some interns and be able to help them actually get jobs outside of their internship, to help them get jobs that they're satisfied with.”*  
- Pantry Volunteer

### Approach to Food Waste:

- LMV Members: purchase the right amount of food and otherwise use food waste in compost/garden
  - Some Pantry Volunteers tried composting in the past and it didn't work out for them...
- Pantry Volunteers: purchase the right amount of food and eat everything
- LMV Members view waste as a structural issue whereas Pantry Volunteers view waste as a personal issue

*“I remember that I told my daughter, when she was in elementary school, I said to her “Look, if they give you an apple and you don't want to eat it at that moment because you're already full, then put it in your lunch box, okay?” She told me “No Mom, because if I put it in my lunch box, they will scold me or punish me.” So when she told me this, I said “Why are they going to punish you for keeping an apple that you are not going to eat right now? Or is it that you prefer-- would you rather go and put it in a trash can than save it and eat it later?” ...I couldn't understand ...and after this I started talking to the schools, I would say, “Why not save the food that the children do not want to eat?”*  
- LMV Member

## Findings:

### Relationships Between Race/Ethnicity/Racism and Food Access/Food Waste/ Relationships Between Food Justice and Racial Justice:

- LMV Members: confident talking about food as means of power and comfortable talking about race
  - Agree there is a relationship between racism and food justice
  - Diverse communities may lack access to culturally relevant food and/or knowledge about food, may consume more processed foods, and may treat food waste/leftovers differently
- Pantry Volunteers: less comfortable making the connection between racism and food justice--often considered culture/SES as a factor

*“We are not taught to eat healthy and stay active so that we can avoid medications, surgeries, and hospitalizations... I think there needs to be more education about food as health, especially in more diverse, lower-income communities.”*  
-LMV Member

### Securing Access to Healthy Food:

- LMV Members: access healthy food via their gardens and organic produce
  - Some eat plant-based, utilize food pantries, utilize food knowledge
  - Some mentioned access to land as a limiting factor
  - Some note that the LMV model is better than access to free/cheap food
- Pantry Volunteers: focused on financial security; not impacted by COVID

*“We've always had sufficient funds to be able to purchase things that were healthy...”*  
-Pantry Volunteer

*“The way I have brought these resources to my family has been by growing my own food in my garden.”*  
-LMV Member

*“I work to secure access to healthy food... by studying in extreme depth food and herbs, which I've been doing all of my adult life, basically. I'm vegan and I know a tremendous amount about nutrition.”*  
-LMV Member

### Potential Collaborations:

- LMV Members want to see more communication and advertising about LMV to grow membership
  - Two way street: share information about the Pantry with LMV Members too
- Strategies for increased awareness:
  - 3 LMV Members mentioned donating LMV produce to the Pantry (labeled)
  - Kids’ Club
  - Educational workshops to teach people how to cook Pantry foods that may not be culturally relevant
  - Pantry could give compost to LMV

*If you ask me how LMV and Sacred Heart Pantry can have a closer relationship, maybe it's by working together -- the gardeners working together and bringing some of the produce so that members of Sacred Heart can have access to that variety of produce coming directly from members from LMV.”*  
- LMV Member

## Demographics:

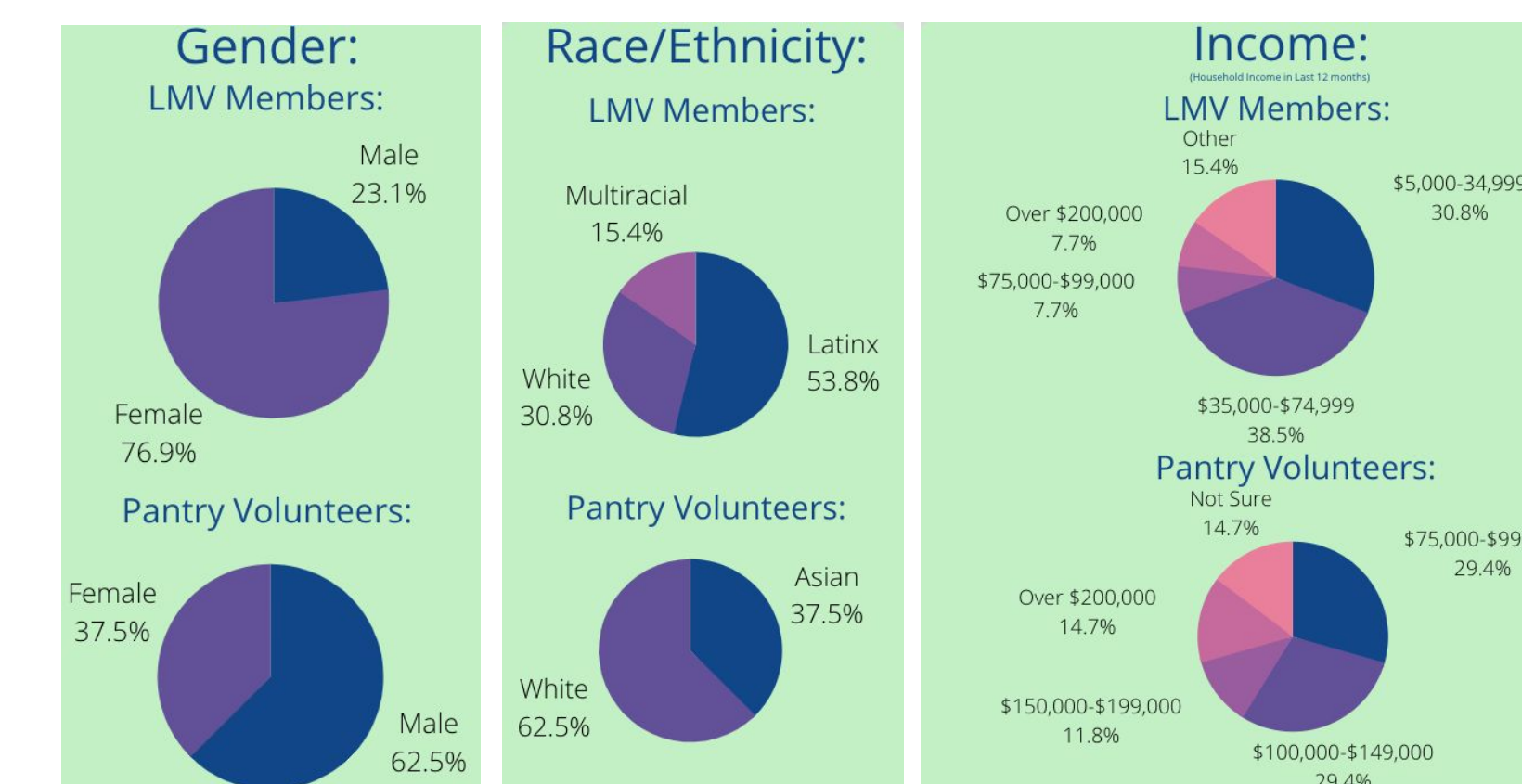


Figure 2: LMV Members and Pantry Volunteers’ indicated gender, race/ethnicity, and income.

## Conclusion:

- Community building is important to Pantry Volunteers & LMV Members
- LMV Members generally have more sophisticated understandings of food justice, including talking about power relations, right to food, race, and structural causes of hunger and food waste
- LMV Members want to see more communication and advertisement of LMV programming and Pantry resources
- Ideas for collaboration: donated produce, Kids’ Club, workshops, compost
- LMV Members, Pantry clients, and Pantry Volunteers prefer the choice model

## Next Steps:

- These results are only preliminary: we will continue coding and analyzing these interviews using ATLAS.ti
- The Collaborative recently received a CalEPA Environmental Justice Small Grant:
  - Employ research-based agroecology techniques to reduce food waste, produce compost, and improve the sustainability of emergency food assistance programs
  - Craft materials for five educational workshops, facilitate leadership development opportunities for gardeners and Pantry volunteers, and create a replicable resource guide available to food pantries and urban gardeners so that they may use and adapt this food justice approach

## References:

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