Project Report

Evidence-Based Planning to Address Injustices: Using Research to Identify the Root Causes of Poverty and Build Food Security Equity in El Paso*

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Introduction

To address injustices and build food security equity in El Paso County (Texas), comprehensive evidence-based plans are needed. Researchers can play several key roles in generating evidence and strengthening the comprehensive planning process. For example, researchers can review the existing literature on the root causes of poverty, therefore providing a summary of the determinants of poverty in other contexts. These lessons then can be applied to the local (El Paso) context. In addition, researchers can interview disadvantaged community members, creating a base of evidence on the root causes of poverty from the perspective of people with lived experience. In addition, researchers can survey targeted and general populations to establish baseline levels of community needs, which then can be used to measure the impact of future intervention efforts on community well-being. Furthermore, researchers can engage members with lived experience in the planning process itself, adding immense and crucial expertise to the planning process and informing future projects.

Food insecurity is overlooked in many populations, including college students, even though half of college students are estimated to be food insecure (El Zein, Vilaro, Shelnutt, Walsh-Childers, & Mathews, 2022; Miller, Middendorf, Wood, & Lutter, 2019). Previous research among college students has demonstrated associations between food insecurity and poor academic performance, as well as low graduation rates, headaches, low energy, and low concentration (El Zein et al., 2022; O'Neill & Maguire, 2017; Martinez et al., 2022). Food pantries on campus were designed to provide immediate relief for college students; however they remain underutilized across campuses (El Zein et al., 2022). As a result, researchers aimed to understand the perspectives of college students at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and the El Paso community towards food security and, by extension, inform recommendations to increase food

equity through the utilization of available food assistance services on and off campus. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions captured the prevalence and causes of food insecurity in El Paso, while a student council also convened twice a month to offer suggestions as to how UTEP can create a more secure campus to fit students' needs.

Our research team contributed to food security equity planning for El Paso County in the following ways:

- **Literature Review**: We conducted an extensive literature review on the root causes of poverty in the United States, with a focus on available studies in areas that closely resemble our local context. El Paso—a vibrant community along the US-Mexico border that is nearly 80% Hispanic—is a unique bicultural context which suffers from low wages and high levels of poverty (Moya et al., 2020). This literature review provides a base of evidence to identify the barriers to achieving upward economic mobility and food security.
- **General Population and Focused Site Surveys**: We conducted scientific surveys of the general population in El Paso County as well as a targeted population of interest (higher education students at UTEP). The surveys allowed us to generate representative estimates of community needs and establish baseline measures from which to evaluate future efforts to improve community well-being. The survey findings are the most current and accurate estimates of food security that have ever been produced in our community.
- **Interviews and Focus Groups**: In-depth interviews were conducted among UTEP administrators and key decision makers (n=10).

- **Student Advisory Council and Pilot Study**: A total of three focus group discussions were held with UTEP students with lived experience of food insecurity and community health workers (CHW's) (*promotores(as*) (*n*=18).

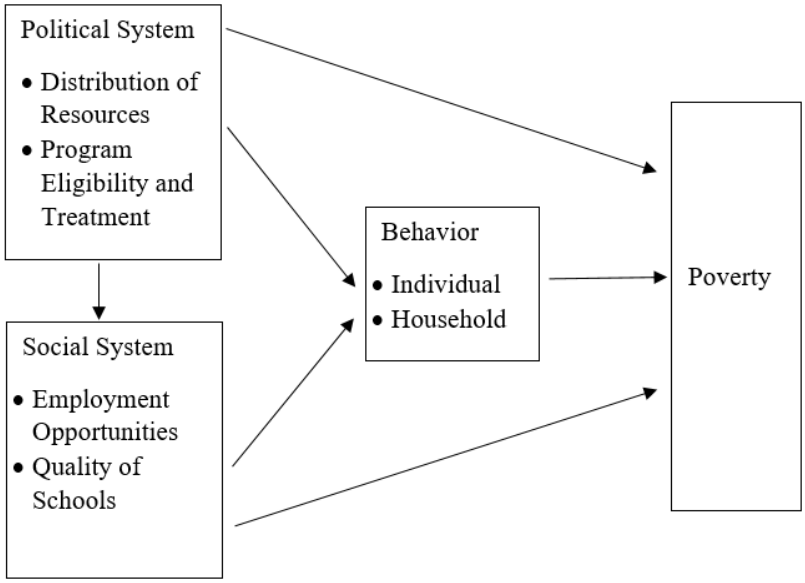
The following research report summarizes the work of seven main research components: (1) Literature Review, (2) El Paso Community Survey, (3) UTEP Student Survey, (4) Interviews, (5) Focus Groups, (6) Student Advisory Council, and (7) Food Distributions at UTEP. For each component, we summarize the key findings, explain how the targeted community has benefitted from this component, and identify obstacles/successes that were encountered. The targeted community is defined as impoverished, food insecure, and/or vulnerable community members residing in El Paso County, Texas.

Component 1: Literature Review

Overview and Key Findings

This literature review examines the following question: What are the root causes of poverty in the United States (for the full literature review, please see Appendix A)? Given the encompassing nature of poverty, multiple academic disciplines—economics, behavioral economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and public policy—are reviewed to uncover the causes of poverty, with a focus on the less proximate or "root" causes of poverty. In total, the literature review identifies and compiles insights from over 20 leading scientific studies, with a focus on studies on Hispanics and Mexican Americans.

Figure 1: Root Causes of Poverty in the United States



The literature review identifies two root causes of poverty (the political system and the social system), which in turn affect individual and household behavior (see Figure 1). Stemming from these root causes, several more proximate causal factors of poverty are identified: low

employment opportunities, low educational attainment, insecure immigration status, limited ability to speak English, low access to government and social programs, and lack of homeownership (Aponte, 1993; Chetty et al., 2018; Eggers & Massey, 1991; Orrenius & Zavodny, 2013; Rupasingha & Goetz, 2007). Education and job opportunities represent the two main pathways to higher income and food security. Homeownership is a key pathway to building wealth over time, which in turn provides long-term economic and food security (Salgado & Ortiz, 2019).

How the Targeted Community Benefitted

When designing plans to address injustices and build food security equity for disadvantaged El Pasoans, it is important to identify the lessons of past studies. Learning from previous studies increases efficiency and allows knowledge to be applied and adapted to our local context, which indirectly benefits El Pasoans who are struggling with poverty and food insecurity. The literature review identified the root causes of poverty, as well as more proximate factors that cause and/or sustain poverty in the United States. Importantly, this knowledge allows us to identify factors that are likely to serve as key barriers for financial and food security in El Paso, along with promising pathways for upward economic mobility. Although the El Paso context is unique in many respects, previous studies provide a theoretical conceptualization of the challenges and a list of key factors that are *likely* to impede financial and food security. With this base of knowledge, we have a starting point to begin conceptualizing, and ultimately addressing, the challenges encountered by many impoverished and vulnerable El Pasoans.

Obstacles and Successes

The main obstacle for the literature review was identifying studies in contexts that are similar to El Paso. Many studies look at the causes of poverty in the United States in general, or

focus on areas that have small percentages of Hispanics. Another important obstacle was the high breadth of disciplines that study poverty, because a thorough literature review needed to consider studies from economics, behavioral economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and public policy. It was time-intensive to consider all the different disciplines and learn the relevant terminology within each discipline.

Fortunately, one key success was identifying some studies that conducted comparative analyses on poverty across race and ethnicity, or focused specifically on Hispanics (Aponte, 1993; Eggers & Massey, 1991; Orrenius & Zavodny, 2013). Salgado and Ortiz (2019) examined wealth accumulation among Mexican Americans, which is even more relevant to the socioeconomic context of El Paso. Another key success was that we were able to overcome terminology challenges and include studies across several disciplines, which greatly improved our understanding of the root causes of poverty.

Component 2: El Paso County Survey

Overview and Key Findings

We hired Portable Insights—a professional social survey firm with over 16 years of experience across the United States—to administer a scientific representative survey of adults (ages 18+) in El Paso County. The survey instrument contained validated questions (when available) to measure community needs, social program participation, community engagement, and sociodemographics in El Paso County. The survey used probability-based sampling to select a list of adult residents in El Paso County, as well as a targeted oversample list of residents in low-income areas (below $40,000 mean household income) throughout El Paso County. Selected El Paso County residents received mailed invitations (with a QR code, URL, and phone number) to participate in the study and the selected residents were able to complete the study online or via phone. Trained bilingual staff members then followed up with the selected residents by phone to invite participation (for Survey Methodology Report, see Appendix B).

The survey was open from November 1 to December 14, 2022, and the selected residents who completed the survey were given a $10 gift card to Walmart, Target, or Amazon. In total, 676 eligible residents completed the survey, producing a weighted representative sample with a sampling error of +/- 5 percentage points. According to the standard American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Response Rate Calculator 4.1 (AAPOR, 2020), the survey response rate was between 5-15%, which generally exceeds recent response rates in the US (Kennedy & Hartig, 2019).

The scientific design of the survey produces representative estimates—within 5 percentage points—of community needs, social program participation, and community engagement among adults (ages 18+) in El Paso County. Whenever available, validated survey

measures are used. For example, the USDA Household Food Security Module 6-item short form is used to measure food security among respondents (Bickel et al., 2000; Blumberg et al., 1999). In addition, a validated question from the Patient Reported Outcomes Measurement and Information System (PROMIS) two-item form is used to measure mental health challenges (Hays et al., 2017). The housing insecurity question is taken from the CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS, https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/index.html), and the community engagement questions are taken or adapted from the American National Election Study (ANES, https://electionstudies.org/).

The survey findings are listed in Table 1. The raw sample column provides estimates of community needs and assets in the collected sample of adults in El Paso County. The weighted sample column adjusts for the demographics in the collected sample (including age, education, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location), and makes inferences about all adults in El Paso County. The values in the weighted sample column thus provide countywide estimates of community needs and assets among adults in El Paso County.

Table 1: Estimates of Community Needs and Assets of Adults in El Paso County, Texas (November/December 2022)

	Raw Sample: Percentage of Adults	Weighted Sample: Percentage of Adults
Food Insecurity: USDA Categories in Past Year		
• Low Food Security	19%	22%
• Very Low Food Security	10%	13%
• Total Food Insecure	29%	35%
Received Emergency Food from Food Bank/Pantry/Church in Past Year		
• Almost Every Month	6%	11%
• Some Months but Not Every Month	9%	11%
• Only 1 or 2 Months	8%	9%
• Total Received Emergency Food	23%	31%

Housing Insecurity: Worried about Paying Rent/Mortgage in Past Year • Always • Usually • Sometimes	 6% 6% 21%	 9% 6% 22%
Received Emergency Rent Assistance in Past Year • Total Received Emergency Rent Assistance	3%	3%
Mental Health Challenges: PROMIS Mental Health Self-Assessment Question 1 • Fair • Poor • Total Mental Health Challenges	 11% 2% 13%	 12% 2% 14%
Community Engagement in Past Year (ANES Survey) • Wrote/Posted Political Messages Online • Attended a Protest/Rally • Bought/Avoided a Product due to Company's Values • Attended Meeting on Issue in Community/Schools • Donated to Organization • Volunteered • Worked with Others to Address Issue in Community	 16% 8% 32% 20% 21% 27% 20%	 16% 9% 26% 20% 16% 24% 17%

N=676

Although the survey only examines adults, it is possible to make preliminary inferences on total population (adults and children) estimates in El Paso County. According to the US Census, the overall population in El Paso County is estimated to be 867,947, the average household size is 2.94, and there are 288,186 households in total (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/elpasocountytexas). Consequently, we estimate that 296,543 people (plus or minus 5 percentage points, which corresponds to a range between 254,180 and 338,907 people) have low or very low food security in El Paso County

Multivariate generalized linear regression analysis reveals the determinants of food security among adults in El Paso County. In line with our expectations from the literature, multiple variables (income, education, and housing security) are associated with higher food

security, while receiving emergency food assistance is associated with lower food security. The finding on emergency food assistance provides evidence that food insecure individuals are choosing to receive emergency food assistance. Contrary to the expectations from the literature, women are more likely to be food secure, and there is no relationship between Hispanic ethnicity and food security.

How the Targeted Community Benefitted

To properly address community needs in El Paso, it is crucial to understand the extent of the challenges in our community. Without proper evidence, any efforts to address community needs will be aiming at a target in the dark. Prior studies have indirectly assessed community needs or used convenience samples, which does not allow for extrapolation to the entire El Paso County population. In contrast, this scientific representative survey of adults in El Paso County uses probability-based sampling, which allows for statistical extrapolation and produces the most current and accurate estimates of local food insecurity, housing insecurity, and mental health challenges to date.

With the creation of these scientific estimates of community needs, we now have a better understanding of the extent of community needs (within 5 percentage points). Consequently, these estimates have the potential to inform policy among key decision makers, which in turn allows for the community needs to be properly addressed and disadvantaged El Pasoans to be better assisted. Moreover, local community organizations can use the data to approach funders and explain the severe extent of local challenges, which in turn can lead to more donations, new and larger government programs, and increased grant funding aimed at directly assisting disadvantaged community members.

Obstacles and Successes

The El Paso County Survey encountered and overcame several obstacles. First, a survey of this magnitude generally requires 1-2 years of preparation and execution, but we were able to prepare and complete it in about 6 months. We are indebted to so many wonderful UTEP colleagues who rushed typical deadlines and prioritized this project. Second, the dual-mode survey design (online and phone) created flexibility for respondents to complete the survey and improved response rates, but it requires constant monitoring and supervision across survey modes. Third, as with other surveys, some respondents do not open mail or respond to phone calls, so it is difficult to reach potential survey respondents. The gift card incentive ($10) reduced some of these challenges, but a larger incentive is needed in future survey rounds to secure adequate participation for representative results. Fourth, the allotted funding was only able to obtain representative estimates within 5 percentage points (plus or minus). A future survey should aim to have more funding to reduce the sampling error, which in turn will provide even more accurate estimates of community needs and assets moving forward.

The main success is that we now have the most current and accurate estimates of community needs (including food insecurity and housing insecurity) in the history of our community. We no longer have to aim in the dark when trying to address these community challenges and these estimates can inform policy to better address poverty and food insecurity. In addition, we now have the research infrastructure—including the survey questions, firm agreement templates, and programming code—to launch more efficient and cost-effective survey rounds in the future. Thus, the survey not only provides estimates of current needs, but it creates baseline measures (i.e., a pre-test) from which to track our progress on addressing poverty and food insecurity in El Paso over time.

Component 3: UTEP Student Survey

Overview and Key Findings

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) was selected as a target site to address inequities in food security in El Paso. UTEP is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, with a student population that is over 80% Hispanic and 50% first generation status. Previous published research, which was produced by a team that includes two authors from this report (Dr. Eva M. Moya and Dr. Gregory S. Schober), demonstrates the high levels of financial and food insecurity among UTEP students (Moya et al., 2022; Wagler et al., 2022), with 45% of students experiencing very low or low food security in 2020. Given that existing research studies find that (1) higher education is a key pathway to sustain financial and food security and (2) food insecurity has negative effects on educational performance, any investment in the food security of UTEP students is a crucial step to sustainable, long-term food and financial security in our community. As more UTEP students achieve higher food security, the likelihood of academic success increases, and larger numbers of UTEP graduates can provide increased food security for themselves and other household members as well.

In preparation for future interventions to address financial and food insecurity among UTEP students, we collaborated with an existing research team and staff colleagues to conduct another round of a survey of UTEP students. Importantly, this survey provides baseline measures (or a pre-test) of food insecurity and food access PRIOR to any of our group's interventions, so that later we can test the impact of any future efforts to address food and financial insecurity. The online survey took place from November 1-18, 2022, and all students received an invitation to participate via their student email address. By completing the survey, students had the opportunity to win a $75 gift card. A total of 2,016 students started the survey, and 1,685

students completed it. With total UTEP student enrollment at 23,880 in Fall 2022, the simple response rate was between 7-8%.

Table 1 illustrates the most current measures of community needs and assets among UTEP students. Based on the survey findings, it is estimated that over 6,200 UTEP students have low food security (23,880 x .26), and over 8,300 students have very low food security (23,880 x .35). The data also reveals the key challenges faced by students in getting access to emergency food, and the students' preferences for what additional assistance is needed. Due to fears about not being able to pay for food/rent, students report high levels of disruptions when trying to concentrate on schoolwork or plan for graduation. These disruptions represent key challenges for achieving food security equity in El Paso.

Table 1: Estimates of Community Needs and Assets of UTEP Students in El Paso County, Texas (November 2022)

	Percentage of UTEP Students
Food Insecurity: USDA Categories in Past Year	
• Low Food Security	26%
• Very Low Food Security	35%
Total Food Insecure	61%
Received Emergency Food from Food Bank/Pantry/Church in Past Year	
• Received *Any* Emergency Food	32%
• Received from UTEP Food Pantry	10%
• Received from Kelly Center for Hunter Relief	3%
• Received from El Pasoans Fighting Hunger	12%
• Received from Another Food Pantry	14%
Housing Insecurity: Lack of Permanent Address in Past Year	
• Lacked Permanent Address	10%
Received Government Program Assistance	
• SNAP	16%
• WIC	4%
• Medicaid	19%

Awareness of Assistance: which of the following resources are available to UTEP students who are in need?	
• Free emergency food	59%
• Free emergency rent assistance	14%
• Free guidance to apply for govt food programs	24%
• Free guidance to apply for govt housing program	21%
• Free guidance to apply for other govt program	20%
• Don't know any	26%
Preferences on Assistance: which of the following resources should UTEP offer more of?	
• Free emergency food	64%
• Free emergency rent assistance	71%
• Free guidance to apply for govt food programs	58%
• Free guidance to apply for govt housing program	63%
• Free guidance to apply for other govt program	54%
• None	5%
Food Access Difficulty: For UTEP students, how difficult is it to get emergency food assistance?	
• Very difficult	8%
• Moderately difficult	20%
• A little difficult	26%
Food Access Difficulty: Main Challenges with getting emergency food assistance	
• Lack of information	78%
• Lack of transportation	35%
• Sites are too far away	26%
• Inconvenient site hours	23%
• Too uncomfortable to pick up food	30%
• None	6%
Schoolwork Focus Disruptions: How often have you found it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork due to worries about food, rent, or other necessities?	
• Almost every day	18%
• About once a week	22%
• About once a month	29%
Graduation Focus Disruptions: How often do you think about delaying the completion of your degree due to not having enough money for food, rent, or other necessities?	
• Often	14%
• Sometimes	35%

Delayed Graduation: For how long have you delayed graduation due to not having enough money for food, rent, or other necessities?	
• 2 or more semesters	12%
• 1 semester	11%
Mental Health Challenges: PROMIS Mental Health Self-Assessment Question 1	
• Fair	27%
• Poor	12%
• Total Mental Health Challenges	39%
Community Engagement in Past Year (ANES Survey)	
• Wrote/Posted Political Messages Online	22%
• Attended a Protest/Rally	18%
• Bought/Avoided a Product due to Company's Values	41%
• Attended Meeting on Issue in Community/Schools	31%

N=2,016

How the Targeted Community Benefitted

When planning to address injustices and build food security equity in a community, it is essential to include the expertise of people with lived experience of poverty and food insecurity. The inclusion of UTEP students in the planning process benefits the targeted community (disadvantaged students) in three main ways. First, the UTEP student survey provided all current students the opportunity (if they wanted) to share their insight and expertise with our planning team. While it would be great to include all UTEP students on the planning committee, the reality is that not all students have the time or interest to meet regularly with us (nor is it practical to meet with over 23,000 people!). The survey thus gives voice to disadvantaged students who are struggling with challenges, but do not necessarily have the time or interest to collaborate on a planning committee. Second, the insights from disadvantaged students provide key evidence to inform and strengthen our planning efforts moving forward. For example, we collected representative data on which assistance resources students are aware of, and which assistance resources students want to see more of in the near future. With these representative

data, (a) we can produce more informed and better plans; (b) there is a higher likelihood that the food security equity efforts will be successful; and (c) more students (and their families) ultimately will receive assistance and achieve financial and food security.

Obstacles and Successes

One key obstacle is that we rely on the kindness of students to complete the survey, and we only were able to offer them the chance at winning a gift card. In the future, we hope to find more incentives to properly acknowledge and value students' time and expertise. Another obstacle it that the implementation of the survey (including the use of student emails) requires the approval and collaboration of several colleagues at UTEP, and we must respect and follow their time schedule. We were fortunate to have the survey run under tight time constraints, but in the future, it would be better to give our colleagues more time.

This survey produces two key successes for our efforts to build food security equity among our targeted community members (disadvantaged UTEP students). First, the survey provides representative estimates of current community needs, as well as student preferences on how to address those needs. We now have a better understanding of the current challenges, as well as representative, student-informed evidence on how to move forward. Second, because the survey ran prior to any intervention efforts, we have baseline measures (pre-tests) of food and financial challenges among students. These baseline measures allow us evaluate the impact of any future efforts by (a) running a second survey and (b) comparing pre- and post-measures. It is a major success that we created the infrastructure to scientifically evaluate all the plans to address food security equity among UTEP students, which in turn will allow us to measure which future efforts are most successful (and which are in need of improvement).

Component 4: Interviews

Between November to December 2022, a total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with a group of university faculty and staff from the Division of Student Affairs, Foster Homeless Adopted Resources (FHAR) program, Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), Academic Advising and Student Support, Women's and Gender Studies program, Dean of Student Office, Student Health and Wellness Center, and UTEP Pantry. These interviews demonstrated faculty and administrative perceptions of food, housing, and transportation insecurity among students, largely shaped by their interactions with students. The 10 interviewees were recruited based on their involvement with the health, safety, and well-being of students. Interviews were conducted at the UTEP campus facilities, in-person or virtually, using an interview guide (Appendix C) and digitally recorded, with an average duration of approximately 23 minutes. Findings were divided into three main themes: food insecurity and nutrition; housing insecurity and transportation insecurity; and envisioning a more secure campus.

Demographics

Among 10 interviewees, their level of education ranged from Associate's degree (20%), Bachelor's degree (10%), Master's degree (20%), and Doctorate degree (50%). Most participants identified as Hispanic for ethnicity (70%), with all participants identified as White/Caucasian for race. The majority of participants were female (60%). The average participant age was 48 years. All but one participant correctly defined food insecurity.

Food Insecurity and Nutrition

All participants had previous encounters with or insights about students who faced food, housing, and/or transportation security. Multiple participants mentioned meeting students who dealt with two or more types of insecurities at one time, often revealing the domino effect of multiple

insecurities when seeking one type of assistance program, such as the Foster Homeless Adopted Resources (FHAR) program. For instance, some students are food insecure because they do not have anywhere to store food items due to housing insecurity, or some students must choose between using money for buying gas or eating every day. Multiple participants have met students who have not eaten in two days, skip meals due to lack of affordable options, rely on fast-food value menus, or drop out of school due to not being able to afford food, especially since many students struggle to work full-time or at all because of school schedules. Key informants further acknowledged the impact of food insecurity on academic performance since being hungry impedes concentration and motivation. Food insecurity is becoming more of a high-profile issue on campus that administrators are learning about through surveys, emails to the Dean of Students office, and everyday conversations. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated preexisting insecurities through more obvious signs, such as longer lines at community food banks, more visits at the campus food pantry, and a large number of students interested in holiday food basket giveaways.

Another aspect of food insecurity is the lack of nutritional value. According to participant 27,

> *"I don't think we have enough food… Affordable, accessible food options are rare… And I realize we're a commuter campus, and so we have to weigh, kind of, costs and investment benefits and so on, but I don't think that we've figured out how to serve our student population appropriately with, I think, access to affordable options for students.*"

Multiple participants have commented on the lack of fresh produce and non-perishables at the campus food pantry. The Department of Women's and Gender Studies hosts a snack pantry that is highly visited by students, but one of the department's faculty members is aware that the pantry cannot always have the healthiest options to meet the demand of students but will hopefully receive

more funding from the American Heart Association to offer heart-healthy options. In addition, the American Heart Association has offered to help students with applying for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for which many students do not know that they are eligible. Similar to the campus's food pantry, the snack pantry does not directly ask visitors if they are food, housing, or transportation insecure to ensure the comfort of students. Moreover, the number of items that they can take from the food pantry varies because demands often surpass the available supply. Concerning nutritional value, however, one of the participants claims that students may not prioritize nutrition anyway due to the lack of health education.

According to participant 25,

> *"There's some nutritious food on campus, but students don't care to eat nutritious food, because they feel like they don't need it right now. Okay, 'I'm young, I'm indestructible, I can eat whatever I want, and it's going to be good for me.' They do not know what is waiting for them down the path: diabetes, high blood pressure, liver problems. You know, we live in a community where we have one of the highest diabetes populations, the highest high blood pressure populations. It is just... It all comes from our lack of not eating nutritious food when we are younger. We don't know unfortunately."*

Despite efforts by the UTEP Student Health Clinic to ensure that students are aware of health and wellness services provided by the university, one service that is underutilized by students is meeting with a nutritionist at the clinic who can work with their circumstances to devise strategies for eating healthy yet affordable meals.

Participant 25 recalls,

> *"When I go upstairs [to the cafeteria], I see all the students eating pizzas and burritos and hamburgers, because it's quick and they think is cheaper than a nutritious meal, but it is not, but they are not going to spend the time of eating vegetables and soup nutritiously. That is just nature. That is just the youth."*

Housing Insecurity and Transportation Insecurity

Housing insecurity is an issue that administrators have observed for several years, including times when they have caught students bathing in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry facilities, sleeping under laboratory tables, or living in their vehicles. The FHAR program was created to address these issues, and the Financial and Social Services (FSS) program, which is another component of the school's advising model, helped students with developing financial literacy and wellness. Through the FSS program, advisors were further able to identify students who were on the cusp of being housing insecure, such as students who were couch surfing. Nonetheless, the university is currently limited in how it can assist students. While the FHAR program depends on donated funds, the Dean of Students office also offers emergency housing funds and has some student housing units on hold in case students truly have no other housing options after being assessed and triaged.

For instance, a 19 year-old woman's safety would be more at risk if she was sent to the Opportunity Center for the Homeless. However, the university can only receive students, not their families or children, and students are eventually expected to pay for housing on campus via financial aid if they cannot find affordable housing off campus. Through conversations with students, key informants noticed that a large number of students who face housing insecurity deal with disruptive family dynamics (e.g., kicked out by parents, uncomfortable around family), barriers as international students (e.g., unable to secure student loans), insufficient salaries (e.g., part-time

employment or inadequate pay), and as a result, informants often refer students to resources off campus.

If students who lack reliable transportation must live further from campus to secure affordable housing, then that creates further barriers to attending school. Though the university offers bus passes for discounted fares or even Uber vouchers in some cases, most participants are aware that using the public transportation system in El Paso is still challenging due to the geography of the city, which is large and spread out, thus requiring multiple transfers when using the bus. For some students, this means relying on other people to take them to campus, which then can be used against them in the face of changing dynamics and power struggles. As a university located on the U.S.-Mexico border, some students who commute between Mexico and the U.S. to come to campus deal with unpredictable timing when crossing, leading them to be late to class or appointments. Though some conversations have taken place with county officials to create express bus routes that go directly to campus from the outskirts of town, this plan has not garnered much attention. Aside from the relationship between transportation insecurity and housing insecurity, there is also a relationship with food insecurity since it can be difficult to carry large amounts of food, though the food pantry on campus tries to help by providing sturdier tote bags.

Envisioning a More Secure Campus

Upon discussing the vision of a more secure campus with key informants, several recommendations rose to the surface. One of the leading concerns among key informants was the impact of food, housing, and transportation insecurity on mental health. According to participant 25:

> *"We did a survey about a year and a half ago and we asked the students: other than the services that we provide here [at the student health clinic], what other services are your number one priority? In addition, the number one was anxiety and depression… So that's why we hired a social worker from Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to have them here on the clinic because, as you may know, psychological and psychiatric situations still have a stigma in our society, and so we were afraid that many of the students may have not been seeking those kinds of services because they don't want their friends to know they're going to CAPS… And so by housing the social worker here, when you come in here, your friends don't know if you're coming for medical or psychological services because it's all under one roof, and so we're able to disguise that. That is why we have that, and we are in the process of hiring another social worker from CAPS, so we can have two because of the demand. My nurse practitioner is geared to and has the background to be able to also provide anxiety and depression services, and so we have a combination of crisscross referrals."*

Indeed, mental health services should be included in any form of wrap-around services on campus, hence why advisors are currently trained through the advising model on how to discuss these topics in a considerate way with students without requiring them to tell their story to multiple people. Key informants also cited filing student of concern reports through the Dean of Students office commonly since those reports are then assigned to case managers who follow up on the students' circumstances and needs. In general, it is important for all faculty and staff to pay attention to signs of food, housing, and transportation insecurity, especially with the university's plan to increase student retention by 2030.

According to participant 18,

> *"As a university, we need to do better at getting at the root of things instead of being superficial about where this University wants to go by the year 2030, I think that we need to look at the very bottom and fix those things at the bottom, and in turn, it fixes everything else at the top in terms of retainment, GPA, students that finish at UTEP… All these things can be helped by addressing the fundamental issues at the bottom, the roots."*

Overall, the need for preventive and sustainable measures was strongly reinforced throughout the interviews to reduce the need for emergency funds or food pantries in the first place. According to participant 19,

> *"I think unfortunately it's not a ton of preventative measures or anything that's helping in a very sustainable or long-term; it's more in the moment giving them money, in the moment to help them out, giving them food in the moment to help them out. I think that is something that could be improved upon, is things that are more preventative in nature, like helping set people up for success as opposed to just putting a band-aid on things, but I do, you know, think it has its purpose. The pantry is very useful for people and those baskets are very useful for people."*

Most participants attributed the root causes of food, housing, and transportation insecurity to economic limitations associated with being a low-income, migrant, and historically disadvantaged community. As a result, many participants emphasized the need for building financial literacy among students and establishing community partnerships and donations that will ensure a consistent supply of fresh, nutritional, and nutritional items at the food pantry, develop supervised independent living facilities for housing insecure students, and provide discounted yet nutritional

meals for students on campus. In respect to the food pantry, many participants also suggested moving it to a more central and visible location on campus, as well as advertising the pantry in a more strategic way beyond email and social media platforms.

According to participant 24,

> *"A secure campus would do its due diligence to really get the background of any student that comes in and assess… That ties in with the ultimate student success, and if you can get that information on the onset when you are getting the advising, I think that would make this campus more prepared to assist students and whatever situation may be raised*

Component 5: Focus Groups

Three focus group discussions were held between October to November 2022. The first focus group was held with *promotores(as)* or community health workers (CHW) (Appendix D), recruited through non-profit organizations Familias Triunfadores, Inc. and Ayuda Inc. The other two focus groups were held with UTEP students (Appendix E) recruited through digital and physical flyers distributed by various campus organizations, such as the Center of Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), Foster Homeless Adopted Resources (FHAR), Financial and Social Support Services (FSS), Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), and in common areas, along with word of mouth. Obstacles concerning recruitment included several last-minute cancellations, absences, and schedule conflicts. Two separate student focus groups were implemented to gather a sample size that was generalizable in representing the student population on the UTEP campus. The purpose of these focus group discussions was to gather information from UTEP students and CHWs regarding the challenges that the community may be facing with food, housing, and transportation insecurity on and off campus. CHWs were more likely to experience complex interactions with community members due to their professional positions, while students discussed personal and peer experiences of challenges and barriers on campus.

Demographics for Community Health Workers Focus Group

The first focus group discussion was held with 10 CHWs. All of whom identified as Hispanic, female, and CHW certified. Half of the participants identified as bilingual (English and Spanish), and 60% of participants are from El Paso, TX, while 40% of participants are from Mexico. Educational background and years of experience as a CHW varied among participants. The highest form of education was high school for 30% of participants, certification program for 40% of participants, Associate's degree for 10% of participants, and Bachelor's degree for 10% of

participants, while another 10% of participants did not complete any form of education. Four participants had more than 7 years of experience as CHW, 1 participant had between 1-3 years, and 5 participants had less than 1 year. The mean age of the participants was 49 years.

Community Accessibility

The community has limited accessibility to nutritious foods, reliable transportation, and adequate housing. Continuously increasing food prices leave nutritious food inaccessible and limited time due to work hours leave families too occupied to fulfill nutritious cooking habits. One participant shares the following: "*Groceries are very expensive, so many times it is more practical and cheaper to buy a five-dollar pizza, which my three children can probably eat than to go buy forty dollars of groceries to make a meal".*

Public transportation is extremely limited and unsubstantial, as it does not reach enough areas within the city. Along with economic barriers that community members face, housing is not accessible to individuals with special needs and immigration status. Another participant shares: *"My neighbors had a good house, with plants, a house that they build with effort and fought to have a well-made house. What happens, is he gets sick, and the husband, can no longer work, so the wife taking care of the husband, and couldn't work either. I arrive and she tells me, look at my house, when I see it from the front, I say oh well, your house is very beautiful, but as soon as I enter, I realize that as long they could, they worked and fought to have something good, but the situation of illness and lack of work, they could not continue".*

School Systems and Children

CHWs expressed several concerns regarding children accessibility to food security and transportation. Many of the concerns related to public school system regulations that limit faculty in helping students in substantial ways. One participant shares the following regarding their

experience working at a local school: *“There is a dump of food in schools, and children can't take it from school. I saw, when I started to pick up the trays and throw them away, a child saw me and said please, don't throw it away, give me the chicken, my brothers and I need to eat when we get home from school, and I told him, I can't give it to you. I turned to see my manager, and he said no, don't even think about it, so I get my heart broken."*

Despite the conversation being reverted to community barriers, CHWs further emphasized the need for children and families to have more adequate support from the public school system. One participant shares the following regarding a student who missed the school bus: *"It gave me a lot of feelings, I took her, I told her to come on I'll take you, yes ma'am, the girl was sitting there crying... because she missed the bus because the bus passed her...that is unfair, they should stop because it was even raining, hey, children get wet waiting for a bus, one goes to school and they ignore you.”*

Community Approaches

CHWs expressed concerns for community knowledge on available resources, nutritional information, and community improvement for the future. One participant shares the following: *“To get together, to support each other because there are funds, there are programs, but unfortunately due to our ignorance or shame, we do not know that a social worker can connect us with more scholarships and support programs.”* CHWs discuss the commonality of their perspectives within their work. Limited resources and accommodations for community members leave CHWs striving to complete equitable work. One participant shares the following: *“Then they are not going to pay attention to one or two of us, if we do not unite as one, as a community, a*

gang of parents and say, we come to demand this because our partner is right because, in the end, it is a benefit for our children."

Demographics for Campus Student Focus Groups

The second focus group discussion was held on October 28, 2022, in person in the interdisciplinary research building on the UTEP campus. 40% of participants in the first student focus group self-identified as female, 20% as male, and 40% as gender variant/nonconforming. 80% of participants were Hispanic and 20% were Black/African American. All the participants were full-time students with 80% of them being seniors and 20% of them being doctoral students. 20% of students belonged to the College of Science, 40% to the College of Liberal Arts, and 60% to the College of Health Sciences. All participants are part time employees, with 80% of them working off campus and 20% of them working on campus. 60% of students identify that their yearly household income is in between $10,000- 19,999 and 40% identify that their household income is in between $20,000- 29,999. The mean age of the participants was 26.6 years. The third focus group was held on November 11, 2022, in person in the Interdisciplinary Research Building on campus. 66.6% of participants self-identified as female and 33.4% as male. All the participants identified as Hispanic and with one of the participants identifying as both Hispanic and Black/African American. 66.6% of participants were full time students and 33.4% were enrolled part time. 66.6% of participants were seniors and 33.4% of participants were graduate students. 66.6% of the participants belonged to the College of Liberal arts and 33.4% belonged to the College of Health Sciences. All the participants were employed part time and all of them worked off campus. 33.4% of students identify their yearly household income to be less than $10,000. 33.4% between $50,000-59,000, and 33.4% to be $100,000 or more. The mean age of the participants was 24.33.

Economic Barriers and Generational Poverty

Participants throughout the student focus groups brought up the inflated prices of basic goods and essentials, such as food, gasoline, and housing. Along with this, participants emphasized the economic barriers that individuals face daily through systemic barriers that further perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty. Inaccessibility to transportation, adequate housing, and nutritious foods lead community members to fall into the generational cycle of poverty and chronic illness. One participant shares the following:

> *"Capitalism, like, I feel like that's the source of like poverty. Like, I do not know what else to say. Like, I think it's, that's, that's the answer, like people are intentionally kept in poverty because it creates a desperate working class that has to constantly be selling their bodies and labor to like, just get their basic needs and it just like, that's what it is just to keep making profit for a small group of people who have never had to worry about anything in their lives. Like, that's why people are in poverty. And that adds with more, I guess, like oppressed identities that you have, like, you know, like black and brown people are kept in poverty, more. So, it's just like, all interconnected by things like capitalism was like the simple answer."*

Mental Health and Cultural Beliefs

Mental health and chronic stress are indicators of the continuous pressure individuals face to serve themselves and their families. Cultural beliefs in the border region stigmatize the need of utilizing available resources for students. One participant shares the following:

> *"I didn't want to take from other people who may need it more… I noticed here especially, there's a culture around like that machismo, that to ask for help is silly."*

Along with this, dropout rates continuously rise due to the inaccessibility of higher education as financial barriers weigh heavily on the well-being of students on campus. Cultural beliefs lead individuals to stray away from asking for assistance and further accentuates the belief of individualistic responsibility despite systemic barriers. One participant shares the following:

> *"It becomes like an individual problem. So, people start thinking that like, housing and food insecurity is like an individual problem. And it's an individual's fault that they can't get those resources. That shame keeps people quiet. And when everyone is quiet about it, like everyone, like you can't band together. In addition, it is like, if participant, like participant 13 was saying, if everyone can speak out about it, and everyone realizes, like, oh, wait, why are we all hungry? Why are we all dealing with this? Like, we should not all be dealing with this, like, this is clearly a bigger issue. Like, that is powerful. And that becomes like, collective action".*

Student Approaches

Participants discussed the need for community unity to successfully help those in need. Individual and group approaches are shared to be desired to override barriers that students face. One participant shares the following:

> *"But if there was like anything to help prevent these issues, I do really strongly believe that would be reforming the public education system and starting from a young age just developing huh I'm sorry it's hard, developing like, your emotional and your cognitive and your social skills in school, not just memorizing what you need to know."*

Furthermore, another participant shared their approach to giving back to the community to help diminish the barriers in place that lead to poverty. This participant shares the following:

> *"I think it's because within this region, based on you know, how I've looked into it, a non-profit that I helped found, we just gave 30,000 to El Pasoans Fighting Hunger and honestly... of course there are many other factors, but the wages here are pretty abysmal compared to many other areas and the cost of living comparatively is pretty decent but it's still going up. And our community development and human development is trying to like fix that it's just not sustainable where people are not being able to afford houses much less things that, you know, like food and other extras that they need, school."*

Component 6: Student Advisory Council

Research team members (Appendix F) further aimed to hear from UTEP students regarding food, housing, and transportation challenges through a student-led advisory council (Appendix G). The council shared personal anecdotes and collective observations, ultimately conceptualizing recommendations for implementing changes on campus. Recruitment techniques entailed mass communications (e.g., flyers, emails) and snowball sampling, both of which stopped when the goal of recruiting fourteen members was met. Council members comprised undergraduate, graduate, local, and international students. Members started meeting in October 2022 on the UTEP campus and were introduced to the study findings of annual UTEP surveys that captured the prevalence of food insecurity and associated factors. With facilitation from the research team, council members identified their domains of interest, which determined their area of focus and responsibility towards envisioning a food and housing secure campus.

Based on council members' observations around their communities and campus, they were able to distinguish which resources are currently successful in increasing food security and equity on campus and which resources need improvement or expansion. Originally, eight domains of interest were created. Each member ranked their top 3 domains through a QuestionPro survey to organize the teams to which each member will be assigned.

1. Food options and resources on- and off-campus: accessibility, affordability, and availability.
2. Sodexo (i.e., uses, food waste, sources of food).
3. Campus food gardens (i.e., accessible space, usage).
4. UTEP Pantry: extension, re-branding of Pantry, social media.
5. Social media strategies to increase student awareness of support services.

6. Addressing stigma concerning food and housing insecurity.
7. Untapped opportunities: 1301 University and equivalent science course.
8. Housing and transportation need and resources.

Based on the survey results, students were matched by their interests with two members per group. The research team consolidated teams to prevent members from becoming overwhelmed since only there were two members per group and issues were too broad. The domains were narrowed down based on the council's input into the following four themes:

1. Food options and resources on/off campus + Sodexo
2. Campus food gardens + untapped opportunities (1301 classes)
3. UTEP pantry + social media strategies
4. Stigma + housing and transportation needs/ resources

In total, there were six council meetings, each one with a length of two hours. At each meeting, team members prepared guided questions focused on each group's progress, observations, goals, and challenges. Each meeting had a particular objective as part of helping them develop their recommendations. The research team took notes, created meeting minutes with summaries, delivered updates about events related to food and housing security, offered feedback for each team, and discussed next steps at the end of each meeting.

Each team had the opportunity to confer with one another, creatively convey their observations using the easel pad and markers, and present their observations, followed by a discussion where council members connected the dots between their domains and developed recommendations to help each other build their ideas. The council members guided the research team towards understanding the realities and needs of food, housing, and transportation security.

Recommendations

As council members were asked to identify three actionable items, summarize their theme, create a concise rationale, and consider how they will use illustrations to convey their ideas, each group ultimately produced a final narrative. Each narrative is summarized below.

Group 1 (Sodexo/Food Options On & Off Campus) proposed that Sodexo could provide free or lower-cost meals to students in need, have more diversity at Pick n' Shovel (vegan and international-friendly food), free or low-cost transportation/food delivery services to UTEP students to get nutritious groceries and immediate needs and increase "snack pantries" on campus piloted at Women's and Gender studies to include all colleges and departments. The audience needed to implement these recommendations besides Sodexo are the University leadership, Community stakeholders, and donors.

Group 2 (Food Sustainability + Student Awareness) through pantry gardens on campus, implement a student resource list for student orientation, have a Scavenger hunt for student resources, and have a UNIV 1301 campus resources presentation. The audience needed to implement these recommendations are President Wilson, UTEP administration, Student Government Association Executive members, and the department in charge of the University studies/ entering student program UNIV 301.

Group 3 (UTEP Pantry + Social Media Strategies) proposed to do research and find donors for the pantry as well as what kind of donations UTEP can accept and have better marketing for the food pantry. This can include promoting it through the tv screens around campus, using A-frames at locations where students pass through the most (S, funding for A-signs needed), and through the "MyUTEP" website, as there's space on the Dashboard. The group also suggests drafting new

language (inclusive, reduces stigma) to be used in social media posts. To combat the stigma, the group thought of two ways to do so. One is to rename the food pantry and the other is to reorganize the food pantry in such a way that students and staff can enter and pick up the food they need like a supermarket. This will require a new room for the food pantry. The audience needed to implement these recommendations are the Dean of Students Office (Dean of Students Dr. Jones-Chavez) and the Student Engagement and Leadership Center (Assistant Director Mallory Payan).

Group 4 (Roof and Food for Everyone) proposed to reach out to Financial Aid to investigate limiting requirements, access to loans, and scholarships, and Housing to ask for the statistics of approximate availability during Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter, to get an idea of whether we may be able to help place some students, have a virtual appointment on January 4th to address NAMI potential proposals to tackle stigma/shame/co-dependency. The audience needed to implement these recommendations are NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), NAMI UTEP, FHAR, and SGA.

In addition, all groups supported the idea of renaming the food pantry, and council members offered suggestions that were then used to vote for the best new pantry name via QuestionPro. The top results were Pick n' Go, Miner Grab, and the following names were tied in third place: Mine n' Mart, The Food Mine, and Pick a Meal. However, only 8 out 14 council members chose to vote. The student council is currently determining whether they will be continuing their sessions in Spring 2023 to assist in advancing and implementing their recommendations on campus.

Obstacles and Successes

The first obstacle was determining a time to meet that aligns with everyone's schedule. A common meeting time was chosen, and the option of joining via Microsoft Teams was also

offered for those who were not able to attend in person. Once the meeting started, however, another obstacle rose to the surface: students were reserved and shy or uncertain about sharing perspectives because of the lack of trust and confidence. Research team members aimed to create a relatable, trustworthy, and organic environment that created a safe space, ultimately allowing council members to develop trust and grow more comfortable with sharing their input. In addition, the research team provided food at each meeting, ensured that food did not go to waste, and invited students to connect with existing services in the community.

Component 7: Food Distributions at UTEP

Since 2019, UTEP researchers have been reporting the food and housing needs of the student population at the University. This pilot program is one of the efforts being done to help our student population. The resources from the El Pasoans Fighting Hunger food bank were brought on campus through a mobile pantry where volunteers delivered bags and boxes of different kinds of food to UTEP students, faculty, and staff (Appendix H).

The event was held on December 5th and 8th, 2022, in front of the Undergraduate Learning Center (UGLC) building from 9 am to 1 pm each day. At this event, 1,092 bags, which is equivalent to 18,455 lbs of food, were distributed. On Monday, December 5, 500 bags of food were distributed by 19 volunteers, including 8 community health workers from Familias Triunfadoras, Inc. Food items included oranges, kiwis, cereal, chips, rice, juice, oatmeal, and canned sweet potatoes. On Thursday, December 8, 592 bags of food were distributed by 24 volunteers, including nine community health workers from Familias Triunfadoras and AYUDA, and 5 American Corps members. The food items distributed included cereal, kiwi, pasta, tomato sauce, rice, apples, cookies, peas, granola, oatmeal, and oranges. We hope this is only the beginning of this initiative, and that in the future this event will occur more frequently for our students, faculty, and staff at UTEP.

Obstacles and Successes

One of the obstacles that were encountered was the limitation of reusable bags to deliver. Plastic bags and unused boxes were given to students and staff to carry the food items due to these limitations. In the future, the proposed solution to this could be to have enough recyclable bags with an event logo that could be used for upcoming events. Another change that could be implemented to improve the event would be to have more publicity within and outside of the UTEP

community through flyers, announcements, and advanced emails through the administration. Along with this, creating an inviting atmosphere with music and a helpdesk that provides a variety of resources available to students and staff could be beneficial.

Events

The food equity team members had the opportunity to assist in different activities and events to inform, get informed, and act on improving food security on campus throughout the academic semester. One of these events included Dr. Moya being invited to assist to a Student Government Association (SGA) meeting to present the highlights of the project and the proposed changes the SGA could assist the team with moving forward. Graduate research assistants attended the H.O.P.E.+ Health, Outreach, Prevention and Education health fairs at the Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe in downtown El Paso. Research associate/assistants from the project described the overall impact of the project and its events on them through personal reflections (Appendix I).

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Appendix A

The Root Causes of Poverty in the United States: A Literature Review*

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Introduction

According to the official poverty rate from the United States Census, approximately 37.9 million people in the United States (11.6% of the total population) lived in poverty in 2021. When only considering children under age 18, the poverty rate was much higher at 15.3% in 2021. Within the Hispanic population, the poverty rate was 17.1% for the same year. All three poverty rates (the overall poverty rate, the child poverty rate, and the poverty rate in the Hispanic population) did not significantly change in the United States between 2020 and 2021 (Creamer et al., 2022).

It is well established in the literature that poverty has a wide range of severe, negative consequences on adults and children. Poverty impedes education by reducing attendance and enrollment, child development, cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and degree completion (e.g., Engle & Black, 2008; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Shah et al., 2012). Not surprisingly, poverty has many negative effects on health across the lifespan, including on general health status, child health, mental health, acute illnesses, and chronic disease (e.g., Starfield, 1992; Murali & Oyebode, 2004; Worrall et al., 2005; Crews et al., 2015).

This literature review examines the following question: **What are the root causes of poverty in the United States?** Given the encompassing nature of poverty, multiple academic disciplines—economics, behavioral economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and public policy—are reviewed to uncover the causes of poverty, with a focus on the less proximate or "root" causes of poverty. In total, the literature review identifies and compiles insights from over 20 leading scientific studies.

The literature review proceeds as follows. In the first section, I review the current state of the theoretical literature to identify (and compare) the main theories on the root causes of

poverty. Second, I review the empirical studies to uncover the key factors that cause poverty in the United States. The third section breaks down the different causes of poverty to help illuminate the underlying or "root" causes of poverty. Finally, in the last section, the implications of the findings are considered for addressing poverty in the El Paso, Texas community.

Main Theories on the Root Causes of Poverty

The literature recognizes three main theories on the root causes of poverty: (1) behavioral theories, (2) structural theories, and (3) political theories (Brady, 2019; see Table 1 below for overview). Behavioral theories (e.g., Sawhill, 2003; Bertrand et al., 2004; Cruz & Ahmed, 2018) emphasize the role of individual- or family-level decisions in producing outcomes of poverty. According to these theories, certain behaviors increase the likelihood of poverty, and the individuals or families that engage in these behaviors are more likely to be poor. For example, behaviors that increase the likelihood of unemployment will also increase the likelihood of poverty over time, as unemployment creates severe financial challenges on households. In this view, individuals are faced with incentives, which in turn affects the behaviors they pursue. These theories tend to place blame on the shoulders of the poor individuals themselves, or at least on the incentives that produce high-risk behaviors. To avoid poverty, according to these theories, individuals need to avoid the behaviors that greatly increase the risk of poverty.

Table 1: Main Theories on the Root Causes of Poverty

Behavioral Theories
• These theories emphasize the role of individual-level behavior in producing outcomes of poverty. Poverty is caused by the risky behaviors of individuals, which are influenced by the incentives that people face.
Structural Theories
• These theories highlight that social structures (demographic and economic contexts) play an important role in causing poverty. Poverty is caused by interactions with negative contexts.
Political Theories
• These theories emphasize that poverty is caused by power relations and collective choices that influence how resources are distributed to people and communities. • Source: See Brady, 2019 for a more detailed summary.

Structural theories (e.g., Wilson, 1996; Rank 2005; Calnitsky, 2018) emphasize the role demographic and economic contexts in causing poverty. Certain contexts increase the likelihood of poverty directly, and also indirectly via behavior. Rather than placing blame on individuals for poor decisions, poverty outcomes are the result of interactions with negative contexts. For example, if an individual grows up in a low-income neighborhood and is exposed to severe environmental health risks and low-quality schools, then the individual will be more likely to be poor as an adult. Individual behaviors matter in these theories, but the behaviors are largely the result of contexts. Food deserts are another example of a negative social structure which increases the likelihood of poverty. In food deserts, the travel and/or financial costs of obtaining healthy food are higher, which leads to higher food costs and lower consumption of healthy food.

Over time, the food desert context directly and indirectly leads to less disposable income and a higher likelihood of poverty.

Political theories (e.g., Huber & Stephens, 2001; Brady, 2009) highlight the importance of institutions and policies in influencing the distribution of resources, which in turn affects the likelihood of poverty. If decision makers favor some areas or groups over others, then the areas/groups that receive less attention and fewer resources are more likely to be disadvantaged. Conversely, when leftist parties and governments try to engage disadvantaged individuals, then their incorporation into the political system will lead to more generous social assistance programs. Over time, the repeated state of being disadvantaged and under-resourced can sustain and even exacerbate disadvantages, leading to more severe levels of poverty. Policies can also discourage (or encourage) certain areas and groups from participating in the political process, which can have downward (upward) consequences on political voice, political efficacy, and economic opportunities. According to political theories, poverty is caused by the decision makers and resulting policies that give advantages to some individuals over others.

Although the theories are presented as separate, competing approaches, it certainly could be the case that multiple theories explain poverty outcomes. Individual behaviors, social structures, and policies can all work in tandem to create, and sustain, poverty. Moreover, social structures and policies can influence individual behaviors, which in turn can contribute to poverty.

Key Factors that Cause Poverty in the United States

Studies reveal several key factors that contribute to poverty in the United States (see Table 2 for a summary by population). In analyzing county-level data across several recent decades, Rupasingha and Goetz find that areas with higher numbers of children in the household,

lower employment labor force, lower educational rates, and close proximity to other low-income neighborhoods are more likely to be poor over time. Moreover, weak infrastructure can greatly reduce the effectiveness of short-term human capital investments. A key implication of this study is that long-term investments in infrastructure are needed to maximize the impact of short-term investments in human capital (2007).

Chetty et al. examine intergenerational income mobility across several decades in the United States, and they find that income mobility has *declined* over time. Several decades ago, there was sizeable movement across income categories during the lifespan, with individuals from low-income households moving into higher-income categories (and vice versa) over time. More recently though, growing up in certain disadvantaged environments makes it very likely that a person will remain in the lowest income category. Some key factors that reduce upward income mobility are the percentage in the area that live with single parents, low-quality K-12 schools, and whether the surrounding areas are low-income. The region also matters: poor children in Western states have more opportunity for upward income mobility than poor children in other regions. The local area and region where someone is born is an important predictor of the income level of that same person later in life (2018).

Eggers and Massey look at United States Census data to understand whether the causes of poverty vary across race and ethnicity. They find that poverty rates vary significantly across racial and ethnic groups. Low education opportunities increased poverty over time across African American, Hispanic, and White populations. Moreover, the analysis reveals that Hispanic and African American populations shared similar structural causes of poverty, including higher unemployment and fewer employment opportunities (1991). This article

illustrates the importance of examining the incidence and causes of poverty across racial and ethnic groups in the United States.

By evaluating changes in poverty over time within the Hispanic population, Orrenius and Zavodny identify some key factors that shape poverty among Hispanics. Some key determinants of poverty include immigration status, educational attainment, limited ability to speak English, household size, and place of residence. These findings suggest some important interventions to disrupt the cycle of poverty, such as financial aid for secondary and higher education and other community education programs (including English as a second language). Some of the main causes of poverty are different in the Hispanic population than in other ethnic and racial groups (2013).

Other studies examine poverty among Hispanics by breaking down the Hispanic population into subgroups. Aponte argues that Hispanics are not a monolith; there are large variations in the incidence of poverty across Hispanic subgroups. Aponte's review of past studies suggest that low wages, decreased employment opportunities, unequal education opportunities, and low access to social benefits are associated with higher poverty (1993). In addition, Salgado and Ortiz further examine poverty by focusing specifically on the Mexican American population. Using original data from the Mexican American Study project, they find that home equity is the main source of wealth among Mexican Americans. Importantly, Mexican American parents' wealth has a relatively limited effect on their children's wealth as adults (relatively less when compared to whites), suggesting that the economic progress of parents does not ensure continued economic success in the next generation. Limited financial resources for many Mexican American adults, and the lack of generational transfer of wealth, create hurdles for Mexican American youth to accumulate wealth over time (2019).

Recent research from behavioral economics suggests that current experiences with poverty affect the likelihood of future poverty. According to Shah et al., when individuals do not possess enough of a necessary resource, the brain uses mental energy to focus on acquiring the needed resource. This focus, or "tunneling", uses up crucial mental bandwidth, which in turn contributes to flawed future decisions that increase the likelihood of poverty. For example, if a household is unable to afford enough food in the current month, they may take on a high-interest payday loan to purchase food. Although this action satisfies short-term hunger, it likely leads to further economic challenges, which in turn increases the severity of future poverty. A crucial point from this research is that there is nothing inherent among the impoverished households that causes them to make these types of decisions. Under the same conditions of scarcity, we *all* would make decisions that likely exacerbate the condition of scarcity and lead to continued poverty in the future, due to the hardwiring in our brains to address urgent scarcity at all costs (2012).

Table 2: Key Factors that Cause Poverty in the United States (by Population)

	All	Hispanic (* indicates that the factor is specific to Mexican Americans)	African American	White
Cause of Poverty	• Low employment opportunities • Low educational attainment • Low quality of K-12 schools • Larger number of children in household • Single-parent households • Close proximity to low-income areas • Past poverty • Region (South)	• Low employment opportunities • Low educational attainment • Immigration status • Limited ability to speak English • Low access to government and social programs • Lack of homeownership*	• Low employment opportunities • Low educational attainment	• Low employment opportunities • Low educational attainment

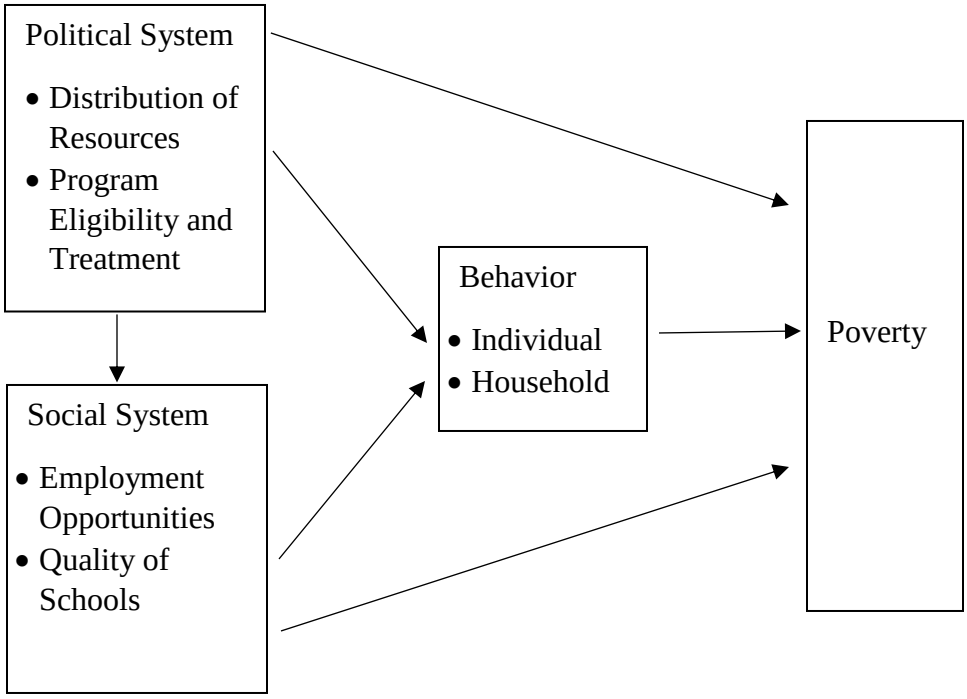
Identifying and Examining the Root Causes of Poverty

Among the key factors that increase the likelihood of poverty, select factors can be further classified as an underlying or "root" cause of poverty (see Figure 1). The social and political context matters for whether a household will enter into, or climb out of, poverty. Across all populations in the US, the labor and educational system shape opportunities for the attainment of income and wealth over time. The political system is an even deeper or less proximate cause of poverty, as policy makers influence labor market outcomes and the quality of schools. Furthermore, the political system matters for poverty outcomes, because policy dictates which

households are eligible for government/social program benefits (and how households will be treated if they decide to receive assistance). Program eligibility can influence whether a household is able to consistently meet their basic needs, such as food security and housing security, and also whether household members are able to acquire citizenship or legal residency.

Importantly, and in line with structural theories, the root causes of poverty affect individual and household behaviors that can greatly increase the likelihood of poverty across the lifespan. For example, the political system produces policies that affect the quality of schools, which in turn will affect individual decisions about whether to continue on with high school and/or pursue higher education. Because educational attainment is a major factor in influencing poverty, the resulting decisions about school affect the likelihood of poverty. Moreover, employment opportunities can influence decisions about whether to pursue certain jobs and training programs, or even move to a different region to pursue work. In addition, the political system determines which households are eligible for government food and housing assistance, which influences decisions on consumption/saving and ultimately affects poverty rates.

Figure 1: Root Causes of Poverty in the United States



Implications for Addressing Poverty in El Paso, Texas

The findings from existing studies have important implications for addressing poverty in El Paso, Texas. The first implication is that sustainable, long-term reductions in local poverty will require extensive and continued collaboration between key political, business, education, and community organization leaders. As root causes of poverty, the underlying political and social structures can serve as key barriers to upward social mobility, as well as fail to provide protections against falling into poverty. By collaborating with political and social leaders, plans can develop to provide more job and education opportunities for currently impoverished households and vulnerable households at risk of poverty.

The second implication is that direct (emergency) assistance resources and services that support further educational attainment and homeownership are crucial in reducing poverty.

Successful completion of secondary and higher education are the long-term protections against poverty, and home equity is the main path to sustainable wealth accumulation. Direct assistance programs and support services should be explored to identify which programs/services increase enrollment in, and successful completion of, higher education in the El Paso context. A particular emphasis should be placed on assistance resources and support services that help meet students' basic needs, as sizable percentages of higher education students in El Paso lack food and housing security (Moya et al., 2022; Wagler et al., 2022). When lacking basic needs security, students have less mental bandwidth to focus on their studies, which in turn leads to lower cognitive performance and less academic success (Shah et al, 2012). As institutions that are committed to educational access, The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and El Paso Community College (EPCC) can play even larger roles in providing assistance resources and support services.

The third implication is that efforts to connect eligible individuals with available government benefits are crucial in reducing poverty. Awareness campaigns, efforts to de-stigmatize the reception of benefits, and friendly enrollment assistance at convenient locations all will increase the reception of needed assistance resources. Enrollment assistance should be provided in convenient locations, which already have established trust with disadvantaged individuals, such as the EPFH Food Bank, Kelly Center for Hunger Relief, AYUDA, UTEP, and EPCC.

The fourth implication is that the availability of other community education programs can help disadvantaged El Pasoans begin to move out of poverty. Awareness and availability of English as a second language programs, for example, can increase job skills and improve job market opportunities. Workshops on financial literacy and the value of home ownership can also play an important role in wealth accumulation over time.

Appendix B

Survey Methodology Report: El Paso County Survey

Project Overview

Portable Insights, Inc. (Survey Group) was selected to administer this survey of El Paso County, TX, according to the questionnaire and survey specifications provided by the research team led by Gregory S. Schober, Ph.D. of The University of Texas at El Paso. The survey contains questions on the following topics: food and housing insecurity, social program participation, physical and mental health, demographics, and political attitudes and behavior. The survey was administered via a mixed-mode (online and phone) format. In addition to a telephone survey, with invitations by pre-notification letters and postcards, an online survey was provided for those who preferred a self-moderated survey. Language options were provided in English and Spanish.

Data collection was conducted between November 1, 2022 to December 14, 2022. All adults (18+) who currently reside in El Paso County, and who are in the sample frame, were eligible to take the survey.

Sample Strategy

The survey group administered the 2022 El Paso County Survey of a representative sample (+/- 5 percentage points) of adults (ages 18+) in households from El Paso County, Texas. Survey group used probability sampling to obtain the general sample of adults in El Paso County and obtain the oversample of adults in select low-income areas in El Paso County. In total, 676 completed surveys were administered by the survey group, which includes 168 completed surveys that are oversampled from select low-income areas of El Paso County, Texas.

Honorarium Incentive for Respondents

Respondents were offered an honorarium incentive (the choice of a $10 gift card to Target, Amazon, or Walmart) for a completed survey. The offer was made in each letter, postcard, and telephone call outreach. The survey group administered the incentive fulfillment, and sent each respondent the gift card, by email or by USPS mail within 30 days of that respondent completing the survey.

Response Rate

To calculate the response rate, the Response Rate Calculator 4.1— the standard of response rate calculation issued by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)—was used (AAPOR, 2020). The survey response rate was between 5-15%, depending on the formula for the dual-mode survey design.

Weighting

Raked weighting using iterative proportion fitting technique was calibrated so that the weighted totals and proportions agree with the known population figures. The following

demographic variables and categories were used for weights: Age, Gender, Hispanic Ethnicity, City Location, and Education. All weights are based on the population source data from:

https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US48141-el-paso-county-tx/ and
https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/elpasocountytexas

Appendix C

In-Depth Interview Questions with Key Informants

1. Please tell me about your role on campus and what a typical day looks like.
    a. How long have you been working in this position?
2. How do you define food security?
    a. What might some examples of food insecurity be?
3. Have you encountered students on campus who may be facing or had faced food insecurity? *Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food.*
    a. If yes, please elaborate.
4. Have you encountered students who may be dealing with housing insecurity? *Housing insecurity is defined as lacking permanent, regular, and adequate housing. Experiencing homelessness may consist of living in either a precarious house, shelter, public space, motel, car, or temporarily living with other people (family, friends).*
    a. If yes, please elaborate.
5. Have you encountered students who have encountered transportation insecurity? *Transportation insecurity is defined as being unable to regularly move from place to place in a safe and timely manner because one lacks the material, economic or social resources necessary for transportation.*
    a. If yes, please elaborate.
6. How do you learn about the challenges that the students are having on campus?
    a. What do you think are the root causes of these challenges?
    b. What do you think has worked to help the students address these challenges?
        i. Why do you think these worked?
7. Do you ask the students if they're food secure, housing secure, and transportation secure? Do you assess for food security?
    a. If yes, what resources do you provide?
8. What is keeping our campus from being a food-secure campus? Are there barriers or challenges?
9. Do you know of any wrap-around services on campus that address food, housing, and/or transportation security among students? (Define wrap-around: supporting in all aspects)
    a. If yes, please elaborate.
    b. What would a secure campus look like in terms of food, housing, and transportation?
10. Is there anything that you would be willing to do to help us secure food, housing, and transportation for our students?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview that we have not discussed?

Appendix D

CHW Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. You work with persons that have a hard time getting food or have difficulties securing stable housing or shelter. Would you please describe how these two difficulties affect your community? We can start with securing food.
2. Now let us discuss unstable housing or shelter. *Housing security is defined as having permanent, regular, and adequate housing. Experiencing homelessness may consist of living in either a precarious house, shelter, public space, motel, car, or temporarily living with other people (family, friends).*
3. What about transportation services? Are these services accessible in your community?
    a. If not, why is that the case?
4. What do community health workers or promotores (as) do to assist individuals and families access nutritious foods? *Nutritious food is to be defined as foods that provide life-sustaining nourishment to the body and aids the body by providing energy to be used to accomplish daily tasks.* (Elaborate in conversation if there are differences between urban and rural areas)
5. Now we are going to shift gears a little and talk about poverty and lack of basic resources (refer to Maslow's hierarchy of needs), which is often connected with having a hard time securing food, housing and transportation. What do you think are the main cause(s) of poverty?
6. How does price affect one's ability to obtain nutritious food?
    a. What can be changed to break out those barriers?
7. What is helping or restricting an individual or family in reaching a food source?
8. What type of foods are within reach of an individual or family in your community? Are they nutritious? *Nutritious food is to be defined as foods that provide life-sustaining nourishment to the body and aids the body by providing energy to be used to accomplish daily tasks.*
9. What barriers are in place when one can access stores, food pantries, or a food bank? (i.e., hour of operation, bus or transportation routes, sense of belonging, costs).
10. Are foods available in the communities you serve within the scope of their culture or cuisine?
11. What services or programs are effective in helping individuals and families' secure nutritious food?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?

Appendix E

Student Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. We have students and staff on our campus that have a hard time getting food or being food secure. Why do you think that is the case?
2. How about difficulties securing stable housing or shelter? *Housing security is defined as having permanent, regular, and adequate housing. Experiencing homelessness may consist of living in either a precarious house, shelter, public space, motel, car, or temporarily living with other people (family, friends).*
3. How do these two difficulties affect them?
    a. Affect their families and their community?
4. What about transportation services for students? Are transportation services accessible? Affordable? If not, why is that the case?
5. Now we are going to shift gears a little and talk about poverty and lack of basic resources, which is often connected with having a hard time securing food, housing, and transportation. What do you think are the main cause(s) of poverty for students?
6. How does price affect one's ability to obtain nutritious food on campus? *Nutritious food is to be defined as foods that provide life-sustaining nourishment to the body and aids the body by providing energy to be used to accomplish daily tasks.*
    a. Off campus? What can be changed to break out those barriers?
7. What is helping or restricting students in reaching a food source?
    a. How does the stigma surrounding food and housing insecurity affect students?
8. What type of foods are within the students' reach on campus?
    a. Off campus? How nutritious are they?
9. What barriers are in place when students want to access stores, food pantries, or a food bank? (i.e., hour of operation, bus or transportation routes, sense of belonging, costs).
10. How available are foods to students within the scope of their culture or cuisine?
11. What services or programs are effective in helping students' secure nutritious food on campus?
    a. Off campus?
12. What gets in the way of students getting food and housing resources they need?
13. What would you recommend to make resources or service on campus more accessible to students?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F

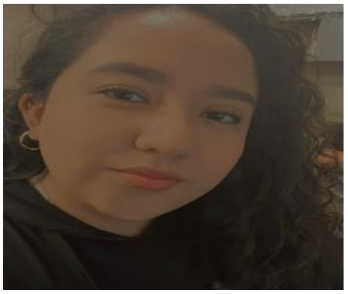
Profiles of Project Team Members

Eva M. Moya, Ph.D. (University of Texas at El Paso, 2010) is Interim Chair and Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Texas at El Paso. Has published several peer reviews articles, chapters, and editorials on health disparities and infectious diseases in Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico Border Region. Her expertise includes border health; tuberculosis and stigma, HIV/AIDS, homelessness, HPV, and Community Health Workers. Eva conducted studies throughout the world during her tenure as a Kellogg National Leadership Fellow.

April Ansari, Ph.D. student in Interdisciplinary Health Sciences (expected graduation in Fall 2025), joined the Food Equity Project because she believes having access to nutritional food is a human right and that it is our responsibility to ensure that our communities do not have to worry about when or what their next meal will be. She hopes to graduate from her Ph.D. program and pursue leadership or researcher roles with global health agencies.

Trianna Bergstrand, graduate student in Social Work Master's Program (expected graduation in May 2024), joined the Food Equity Project because she believes that equitable work is necessary to create positive change. In three years, she sees herself working with a variety of diverse populations as a licensed social worker aiming to continue working in the El Paso region to help make an effective and equitable change that our community needs.

Mariana Paredes, graduate student in the Bilingual Education Master's Program (expected graduation in December 2024), joined the Food Equity project because believes that one of the musts tasks to accomplish in life is making a change in some way, feeling connected to the community, staying informed about the challenges people are passing and acting. In three years, she sees herself as a bilingual teacher involved in dual language programs. Being an advocate of emergent bilingual students.



Valery Giselle Lopez, undergraduate student in Social Work (expected graduation in May 2023), joined the Food Equity Project to get out of her comfort zone in the field of research, while she is completing her internship. She sees herself in three years with a bachelor's and a master's degree in social work, while working at a hospital.

Appendix G

Profiles of Student Advisors

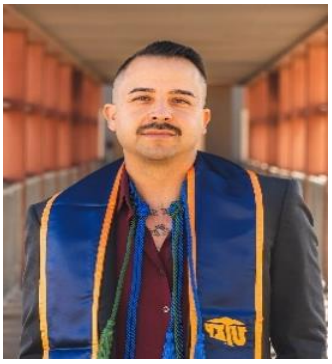
Nicolas Silva, LMSW and Ph.D. student in Biosciences (expected graduation in December 2026), joined the Food Equity Council because he believes food and housing insecurity should not be experienced by anyone and hopes that this council will empower change for generations to come. In three years, he sees himself engaging in dissertation research, writing, and supporting the arts.

Josette Pelatan, Ph.D. student in Interdisciplinary Health Science (expected graduation in Fall 2024), joined the Food Equity Council because she finds purpose and empowerment in advocating for others. It helps her cope with her own struggles, and reminds her we are never fully alone, there is always hope, and worthy fights are never truly lost. She sees herself three years from now healthy, happy, and contributing to bettering people's lives.

Lisette Gonzalez, Social Work student (expected graduation in Spring 2025), joined Food Equity Council to help students at the university have secure food and housing as stress-free as possible to ensure that they may reduce the barriers to their education. She sees herself working towards a master's degree in social work and working to reduce the homeless veteran population.

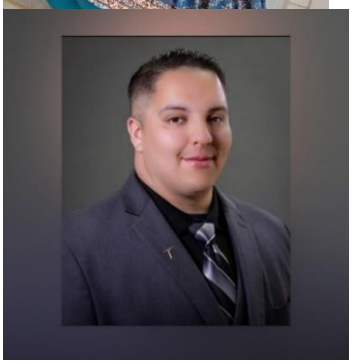
Rosa E Escalante Lopez, Master of Social Work student (expected graduation in May 2023), joined Food Equity Council because working with underserved populations since her undergraduate career she was able to see the relationship between food insecurity and other health disparities. She plans to obtain her state social work license to further her commitment to the social work profession.

Miguel Dante Alvarado, Political Science student (expected graduation in May 2025), joined because of his lack of knowledge regarding food insecurity and his interest in social work as a Senator of the SGA. He believes it was his duty to find a solution and be in the discussion for food and housing insecurity. He sees becoming a senior at UTEP involved in political organizations and aspiring for a career in public administration with a federal or state official.



Patrick Francis Sambrano, master's in leadership studies student (expected graduation in Spring 24), joined Food Equity Council because he was unaware of the severity of the food and housing insecurities within our student body. His goal is to be a part of the solution rather than the problem. He sees himself commissioned, as a 2nd Lt. in the USAF, wants to elevate others to their own leadership positions.

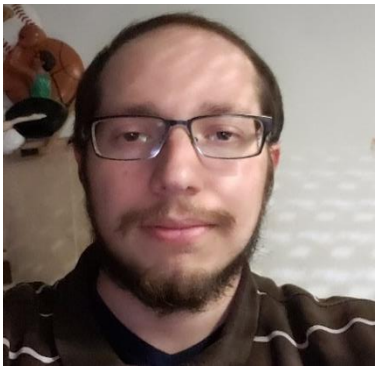
Tandra Ghosh, Master of Public Health student (expected graduation in May 2024), joined the Food Equity Council because as an international student from Bangladesh, coming to UTEP the problems she was going through regarding food and housing and managing all the stuff coming together, the food equity council works on all those. Also, to work together for a safe and hunger-free campus. She wants to be a dedicated Public Health Worker 3 years from now.



Gilberto Jose Luis Ramirez has a master's in health Promotions and graduated in May 2021. He joined Food Equity Council because hunger and food insecurity are something that affects so many without bias. Food security is not a privilege but a right that every human should be afforded. In 3 years, I see myself with an MPA or MPH working for a non-profit organization in Dallas

Genevieve Villa, an undergraduate Social Work student (expected graduation in May 2023), joined Food Equity Council because she was surprised to learn that half of our student population is experiencing food and/or home insecurity. As a council, we can create a stronger campus and a stronger community. She sees herself working with individuals who are having difficulties with mental health and/or those who are homefree.

Alan Lizarraga, MA in Sociology student, (expected graduation in May 2024), joined Food Equity Council because it has allowed him to share his personal experiences and learn more about others' experiences with food insecurity. In three years, he sees himself working in the non-profit sector or with a government agency to bring the necessary change in education policy and continue advocating for marginalized communities.



Tomas Sandoval, Computer Science student (expected graduation in Fall 2023), joined the Food Equity Council because he believes there is a way to help people in need, as well as people who are willing to help. All it takes is for all of us to come together and act. He sees himself working in the tech of industry, learning what he can, to improve more.

Leslie Ann Ruvalcaba, graduated in Rehabilitation Sciences with a concentration in Speech-Language Pathology in the Fall of 2022, she joined the Food Equity Council because is something that is very sentimental to her. She has been food insecure before and knows the struggles that it comes with. She wants others to know that there is help there & there is no shame in receiving services. Three years from now she sees herself graduating from graduate school or starting her clinical fellowship year to start working on her career path.

Isiah Hernandez, Rehabilitation Sciences student.

Vassti Escalante, Biological Sciences student.

Appendix H

El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Mobile Unit Distribution at UTEP on December_5th _and 8th, 2022


TOYOTA


No one


MINERS


Daimler Truck


915-549-1516

Appendix I

Research Associate/Assistant Personal Reflections

April Ansari, MPH, CPH

Ph.D. Student and Research Associate

College of Health Sciences, Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Ph.D. Program

The Food Security and Equity Project has targeted many of the issues that I faced before as a student, but I had either accepted the circumstances as a necessary sacrifice or internalized it as one of my own shortcomings at the time. This experience has made me realize that being food, housing, and transportation insecure was not my fault, I was a victim of a system that should have been more inclusive and aimed at ensuring student success, and many other students face these challenges as well. Naively, I did not realize my experiences were all examples of food, housing, and transportation insecurity at the time, as I thought those terms only applied to people in shelters or on the streets. In turn, I questioned my own capabilities and if I can really handle living on my own, especially when I could not perform as well as other students in my program due to being distracted by food, housing, and transportation insecurity. Due to shame and feeling like I should have my life already figured out as a graduate student, I did not seek help from my university or community. At the same time though, I do not remember there ever being any resources advertised to students at my university at the time. No flyers, no mentions by professors or students, nothing. I simply assumed that since no one talks about it, that there must be no available resources. When I became a TA for nutrition courses a few months later, I now notice that the class had missed opportunities to discuss the food pantry and other resources, as many students needed these resources based on assignments that required them to record their food intake for certain days. In retrospect, this would have been a valuable opportunity to recognize if students deal with food

insecurity or eating disorders and connect them to resources. Stability and freedom are truly the foundation of student success, and it is important to promote long-term security and equity. I had nearly forgotten everything that I endured before as a student until I started working on this project. I am grateful for how this project has made me develop a greater understanding of my own past experiences and given me the opportunity to help others in the same shoes. I am no longer ashamed to talk about these struggles or topics because that is exactly what prevents us from being able to address them.

Mariana Paredes Vargas

Graduate Student and Research Assistant

College of Education

This experience of being part of the Food Equity Project has made me feel very connected, especially with the student council since they opened up and shared their challenges with food, housing, and transportation as UTEP students, this takes me to reflect on how I can contribute to improving the situation of us students who live with different difficulties. The fact that I identify myself with the challenges we encountered, made me more committed to acting in favor of the communities. It is a project I am grateful to know and learn from since it makes me feel in union with UTEP and those who are part of it. Conducting interviews and being an observer of the focus groups, I became most aware of the strategies and recommendations that staff, administration, students, and community health workers think about what they can do to make our university more secure, makes me feel proud that most are aware that they need to work on it and that is open to supporting many of the services and activities that have been carried out, students need to know so that they do not have that fear or shame of asking for help.

Then, having the opportunity to be a volunteer in the UTEP El Pasoans Fighting Hunger mobile pantry in early December 2022, filled me with joy because I was able to help students, staff, and volunteers from the community get food for themselves and their families. Knowing this event was held for the first time on our campus surprised me because it means that changes are starting to happen in the improvement of food safety. It was hard work and being able to do it as a team and seeing the astonished and happy faces of the people involved is the reward. I did not imagine that the community health workers were also there assisting; they brought burritos to share and good energy, which made the environment more comfortable. Many people who came could not believe that food was been given away for free, and they were interested in why we were doing it, but I could also observe that many were hesitant to accept the groceries, some of the reasons were that they had an exam or class or they had to take the bus, and they could not carry it, or they simply thought that there was someone needier than them to receive the food. Something that helped many to get rid of the uncertainty of taking the groceries was that colleagues or friends brought them and encouraged them to take them too. I hope we will continue with this type of activity inside UTEP and be more volunteers to help more people. Knowing that I am contributing to the tranquility of people, grows the desire to continue to serve and do more.

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Being a part of the Food Security and Equity Project has been a great privilege for me as a student and as a future professional. As a first-generation college graduate who has shared the common experiences of economic barriers and generational poverty, I am familiar with food and housing insecurity in a personal matter. Due to this, I am passionate about making just and equitable change

to our community especially when it comes to basic human rights such as nutritious food and safe housing. As a research assistant I have had the opportunity to work alongside my colleagues in focus group discussions and student council meetings that brought so much insight not only into our research but personally motivated me to strive to make further change through my career as a professional. Being involved in this project as a first-year graduate student new to the field of social work has allowed me to practice a variety of skills from community and student engagement, interviewing, data analysis, and group facilitation. These valuable skills I have learned have made me more confident in pursuing my aspirations of being a professional social worker. Along with this, I had the opportunity to volunteer for UTEP's first on campus mobile food pantry which was an exciting experience. In attempts to inform and gather students and faculty to join the pantry, I walked around the entire campus to hand out flyers to anyone who was available. In doing this, many individuals seemed hesitant, confused, or even slightly uninterested. When arriving back to the designated mobile food pantry site, it was such a surprise to see a line of students and faculty waiting to be assisted by a large number of volunteers. It feels just to be able to give to those who need it without having them go through long processes of registration or having eligibility requirements in place that may deter students from being interested. I hope to be able to be involved in the mobile pantries in the possible future, along with participating in the essential research that helps provide equitable opportunity to my fellow colleagues, classmates, and community members.