



# Immigrant Food Systems and Redefining “Healthy” and “Local” Food

## Background

PolicyLink believes that arts and culture are core components of an equitable society, and that they also provide key strategies for achieving equity. Arts and culture can activate, amplify, and extend the power and reach of the voices of the one-in-three Americans living in or near poverty, to accelerate equity for themselves and the nation. PolicyLink lifts up and magnifies arts and culture as both a core component and approach to equitable development and movement building.<sup>1</sup>

Our efforts span the breadth and depth of the fields in which PolicyLink works, touching health, infrastructure, equitable economy, workforce development, and every issue in our portfolio. PolicyLink also works closely with the creative placemaking field, which leverages arts and culture by diverse partners to strategically shape the physical and social character of a place in order to spur economic development, promote enduring social change, and improve the physical environment.<sup>2</sup>

Read our [framing paper](#) to learn more about how equitable development policy can be advanced across multiple sectors when aided by arts and culture practices. Also see [www.communitydevelopment.art](http://www.communitydevelopment.art) for other PolicyLink research about creative placemaking, and arts and culture.

This is the fourth and final component in a series exploring avenues of new research regarding arts, culture, and equitable development. The goal of the series is to encourage the examination of these issues and see that the importance of arts and culture strategies is recognized by potential researchers and those who can use that research.

This document, the fourth in the series, invites researchers to develop a research plan to inform policy change related to the support of immigrant food systems. The proposed research is inspired by the exemplary work of the hua foundation in Vancouver’s Chinatown, whose work is establishing a new model for food policy research as a platform to increase inclusion of immigrant food systems in local food policies. (See sidebar on next page for more details.)

PolicyLink hopes this research will provide data and findings to inform, guide, and make a strong case for policy change, which could then be supported and advocated for by leaders in both the arts and community food system fields. The nature of these issues and a commitment to equity both call for approaches to research that are participatory and inclusive with the residents of the communities.

## Specific Research Aim

The overall aim of this envisioned research is to improve the way food access and community food system policy and practice in the United States is approached so as to be more effective and equitable. “Immigrant food systems” are defined loosely here as immigrant and refugee-owned businesses which drive the cycle of production, distribution, and consumption of food, operating in diverse systems which may or may not be identified with particular immigrant and refugee identities.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and national calls for racial and economic justice, the resiliency and sovereignty of our food systems have become more urgent than ever. While immigrants drive our food systems as laborers, they are much less likely to benefit from the wealth-building opportunities of business ownership. Policymakers and policy advocates have directly contributed to this gap in the ways they overlook the creative and cultural practices through which immigrant food systems have taken root and persisted.

The dominant narrative in which the presence and quality of fresh produce is the primary determinant of what is healthy, or in which geographic proximity is the primary determinant of what is local, leaves little space for cultural values and practices which have nourished alternative definitions of health and community. For example, many immigrant communities create a spatial hub in which the production, sale, and consumption of culturally specific food is interwoven with other supportive elements, including access to services, cultural gathering spaces, and community education. In such communities, the primary determinant of health is not proximity to food retail, but the continued preservation of the community as well as the localized food system which is rooted in ethnic identity. Policy supports might include encouraging the co-location of retail with light manufacturing and warehousing to preserve local food systems in gentrifying communities or supporting cultural gathering spaces through historic preservation and health system investments.

In the same way, immigrant farmers bring their own unique agricultural and business practices which reflect a diverse array of goals and values, such as propagation of cultural foods and seed heritage, economic independence, food access for laborers and family members, and incorporating greater crop diversity. Yet the significance of these practices can be lost if the primary characteristics of local and regional food systems are described as place-based and shortening the link between producer and consumer.



## The Vancouver Chinatown Immigrant Food System

Founded in 2012, the hua foundation uses food as a focal point of their programming for the Asian community in the Vancouver region, which has a long history of Asian immigrant farmers, cultural food, and agricultural practices. In 2015, the foundation released a report analyzing food security in Vancouver’s Chinatown that found that food assets had decreased 50 percent over the same time period that the City of Vancouver had declared increasing food assets by 50 percent as a policy priority. Combining their community knowledge and relationships, and building on research around the disconnect between “parallel food systems” and mainstream food systems, the hua foundation set out to advocate for greater awareness and inclusion of immigrant food systems.

In 2019, the foundation released the *Vancouver Chinatown Social Cohesion Report*, which measures the social cohesion in business networks, and how the changing retail and food business landscape shapes and impacts the neighborhood’s resilience.

The community, a hub of anti-gentrification organizing, is also a point of coordination for emergency food assistance in the wake of Covid-19, the impacts of which were first felt by Chinatowns across North America. At the intersection of these challenges, the hua foundation seeks to honor community heritage while advancing racial and economic justice.

The current moment's reevaluation of the purpose of food access and community food system policies and programs must rebuild policies and programs which are aligned with the goals of underrepresented populations, including immigrants. As policy advocates consider what it takes to move from food access to justice and sovereignty, this research and associated activities will help institutions consider the role of immigrant food systems in the life of residents and communities.

More specifically, the aim of the preliminary research would be to gauge the impact of immigrant food businesses in low-income communities of color and to identify their unique characteristics, challenges, and strengths which may not be currently served by existing food access and community food system programs. We anticipate this research will inform and inspire institutions to create a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and health impacts of immigrant food systems, for the purpose of focusing policy change which supports this level of inclusion within food systems.

## Key Questions and Information Needs

Our foremost objective is to encourage and solicit research concepts and plans about the practitioners and agencies engaged in creative placemaking and arts and culture efforts that have the potential to advance equitable policy change for the 100 million Americans living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. While PolicyLink does not have the funding to support new research projects at this time, we are committed to working with potential partners to raise the necessary support as well as to encourage and guide low-cost pilot projects, such as those done by groups of students in connection with their curriculum.

Outlined below is a preliminary set of information needs we believe can help make the case for policy change organized by themes. The following research objectives, initial questions, and information needs are not exhaustive but are meant to provide examples which may support policy change in each theme or level of change.

### **System-level impacts of immigrant food businesses**

- Explore the role of immigrant food systems in increasing effectiveness of community resiliency and other measures which are identified by local communities. What effects are immigrant food systems having on community spaces, social cohesion, cultural preservation, or other such non-economic measures? Is there a difference between communities that have robust immigrant food systems and those that do not with respect to such measures?
- Similarly, explore how immigrant farmers are contributing to an alternative food system in the United States. What are the impacts of immigrant farmers' particular agricultural and business practices?
- Explore how cultural food producers are leveraging existing transportation and distribution networks or creating their own networks to reach consumer bases. What impacts do the avenues have on environmental sustainability and food supply chains, and what are the primary factors which generate and drive the formation of these networks?

### **Neighborhood-level impact of immigrant food businesses**

- Explore whether immigrant food systems help maintain a sense of community when physical spaces or neighborhoods radically change.
- Explore whether there are particular types of food businesses that play key roles in sustaining local economies, creating social cohesion, preserving culture, providing community spaces, or other measures related to neighborhood stabilization and revitalization.

### **Revising measures, tools, and methods**

- Develop a revised version of the Nutrition Environment Measures Study (NEMS-S) for retail food stores, to expand assessment beyond availability of healthy options, price, and quality and to inform and understand how immigrant food stores may generate other significant impacts for local communities which should be measured. A revised NEMS-S could inform the aims and eligibility criteria for future healthy food access programs.
- Conduct a scan of diverse immigrant food systems, including the nature of the relationships between different components, to inform and understand how immigrant food systems enter in and expand to consumer markets. A deeper understanding could inform the aims, eligibility, and delivery models for future community food system programs.

## Target Audience

The target audience for this research includes, but is not limited to:

- Agricultural extensions
- Land grant universities
- Local government agencies
- Immigrant community-based organizations
- Healthy food access organizations, including CDFIs and food assistance organizations (FAOs)
- Public health organizations and health systems
- National Institute of Food and Agriculture
- US Department of Agriculture regional and federal leadership

## Research Methods

Researchers are encouraged to partner with community-based organizations or immigrant-serving organizations with existing relationships with the immigrant food system, and to center the agency of immigrant food agents or organizations which primarily serve them. For example, researchers may seek to play a supporting role, with immigrant agents and organizations driving key decisions around research objectives and implementation. Research would include a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and could consist of one or more of the following:

- A scan of immigrant food systems across the country and an assessment of locally associated healthy food access and food system programs' inclusion of these systems
- In-person, phone call, and/or online surveys or interviews of immigrant food business owners and community members
- Interviews with organizations primarily serving immigrant food business owners or immigrant communities who led programs with food as a significant element
- In-depth case studies of communities which have established or burgeoning immigrant food systems, which may include analyses of path to ownership, retail volume, number of agents, and/or network of relationships among producers, brokers, and retailers
- A synthesis study or development of a core outcome set around immigrant food systems with equity as the central pillar

- Creative and arts-based research methods such as photovoice and walking interviews, which go beyond a rationalism framework of knowledge and may generate insights into immigrant perspectives and experiences through arts-based data collection, analysis, and dissemination

The research should, as noted above, follow principles and practices of community-based participatory research (CBPR) wherever possible.

## Deliverables and Schedule

We hope that this invitation to explore an important topic encourages researchers to take up these questions, whether as part of their ongoing activities or as the start of a new initiative. For those who would like to explore a partnership with PolicyLink, we envision a process by which prospective researchers work with PolicyLink to sharpen plans for a study and raise the resources for it:

- A concept paper or letter of interest in which the research team conveys their ideas and approach, which would serve as the basis for discussion and planning with PolicyLink about the scope of both the project and the resources necessary to carry it out.
- For a team or teams identified to proceed with us, a thorough research proposal that outlines in more detail the research needs and objectives mentioned above, along with a development strategy jointly created with PolicyLink.

## Notes

- 1 To advance equity, PolicyLink advocates for groundbreaking policy changes that enable everyone, especially people of color, to be economically secure, live in healthy communities of opportunity, and benefit from a just society. PolicyLink is guided by the belief that the solutions to the nation's challenges lie with those closest to these challenges: when the wisdom, voice, and experience of those traditionally absent from policymaking drive the process, profound policy transformations emerge.
- 2 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa. *Creative Placemaking*. National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, DC, 2010.

## Acknowledgments

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Photo on page 2 courtesy of the hua foundation.

## Contact Details

If you would like to discuss this further or have ideas about potential researchers please contact Axel Santana, Associate at PolicyLink, via email ([asantana@policylink.org](mailto:asantana@policylink.org)).



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