

# FIGHTING FOR FOOD JUSTICE IN THE BLACK CREEK COMMUNITY

## *SUMMARY*

Report, Analyses and Steps Forward

Published by the Black Creek Food Justice Network



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, and the broader Food Justice Project, has come together as a result of the efforts of many people. First and foremost, we would like to extend our deepest thanks to the Black Creek Community: thank you for the privilege of working alongside you in the ongoing battle for food justice.

Additionally, we would not have been able to engage the community in vital community conversations, to manage the success of our September Day of Action, to create our multiple food equity and access projects, and express community demands and recommendations, had it not been for the generous efforts of our various collaborators. For this, we would like to express our sincere gratitude, on behalf of the Black Creek Food Justice Network, to the following:

- Black Creek Community Farm Resident Council
- Jane Finch Action Against Poverty (JFAAP)
- Black Creek Community Farm
- Black Farmers and Urban Growers Collective
- Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre
- Food Forward
- African Food Basket
- Everdale
- Food Share
- Toronto Food Policy Council
- Community & Legal Aid Services Programme (CLASP)
- Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University

We are also grateful for the new connections and opportunities for solidarity that arose from the groups involved in our September Day of Action panel discussion: Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty, Justice 4 Migrant Workers, the National Farmers Union, the Network for the Elimination of Police Violence, the Toronto Food Policy Council, and the Workers' Action Centre. We look forward to fruitful future collaboration.

This report would not have been possible without the dedication of the Black Creek Food Justice Network Coordinators: Sabrina Butterfly Gopaul, Rosalyn Endlich, and Rosie Mensah

We would also like to thank the City of Toronto for the funding granted to us under the Access Equity & Human Rights Project that helped to make our endeavours financially feasible.



## BACKGROUND

In 2010, Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty (2010) brought together local residents to discuss this issue in a project called “The Food Right: Right Food Campaign”, within the broader scope of systemic and spatialized inequality.

When asked what food they would need access to in order to increase their food security, 74.2% of respondents said they needed more vegetables in their diet, while 70.3% said they need an increase in provincial income assistance as well as an increase to minimum wage rates to enable households to afford the basic costs of living including the ability to eat healthy and maintain a balanced diet. The results of “The Food Right: Right Food Campaign” indicated that true food security is impossible without social and economic justice including the realization of “Food Justice”.

The concept of “Food Justice” demands that the power imbalances that maintain social inequality must be dismantled in order to even begin to address food security. As such, “Food Justice” has become an important vision for community organizing around food issues.



## FOOD JUSTICE: AS DEFINED BY JANE FINCH

Many communities exist within the broader Jane-Finch community and as such, through our many conversations and various food equity and access projects, it has become clear that there is no one specific definition of what “Food Justice” means to Jane-Finch residents.

Food Justice means many things at once to the community. It means being able to access affordable, culturally relevant and healthy food. It means being able to easily get to and from grocery stores. It means not having food locked away from your access and not being policed by virtue of your race and socio-economic status.

It means having access to enough healthy food for your family at all times, not just at certain times. It means having access to secure and stable work so that you can achieve this. It means having access to lands to grow your own food. It means that food justice work needs to recognize that for some, it cannot be achieved without also working towards justice for migrant labourers.

The point is that all of these meanings of “Food Justice” have been identified as general concerns of the community, and members have a lot to say on how food injustice has affected their lives and what needs to be done to transform injustice to justice.



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

So how did we learn that this is what “Food Justice” means to Jane-Finch community members? We undertook an expansive project of consultation and community engagement, and hope to use this Report as a way to provide both the community and the City of Toronto with our findings and resources that have come directly out of the community’s recommendations and demands.

Jane-Finch is made up of vibrant communities that encounter numerous systemic barriers and challenges surrounding access to healthy, affordable and culturally relevant food.

These barriers have had a direct impact on residents and have contributed to food insecurity throughout the communities located in the broader Jane-Finch community.

In response, Black Creek Community Farm (BCCF) and partners applied for and received a grant from the City of Toronto’s Access, Equity and Human Rights program to coordinate a Food Justice Project within the broader Jane-Finch community.

“Food security” is present when all people at all times have access to sufficient food to lead active and healthy lifestyles. It is currently not present in the Jane-Finch community

Led by the BCCF Food Justice Committee, the Food Justice Project began by engaging the farm and local community in strategy meetings.

Working towards a collective understanding of what food justice means to Jane-Finch communities, the first year of the project was successful in mobilizing a diverse range of community perspectives through multiple food equity and access projects.

While they are separate projects from one another, they are very much interconnected by virtue of their focus on Food Justice and the Jane-Finch community.

These various food equity and access initiatives made up the driving force for the overall Food Justice Project.

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS



As outlined above, there were a total of eight meetings held throughout the community as a way of reaching out on the topic of Food Justice to Jane-Finch residents.



## FOOD FREQUENCY RADIO SHOW

The radio show endeavored to create an experience or journey of collective learning and understanding of Food Justice and what that means to the Jane-Finch community.

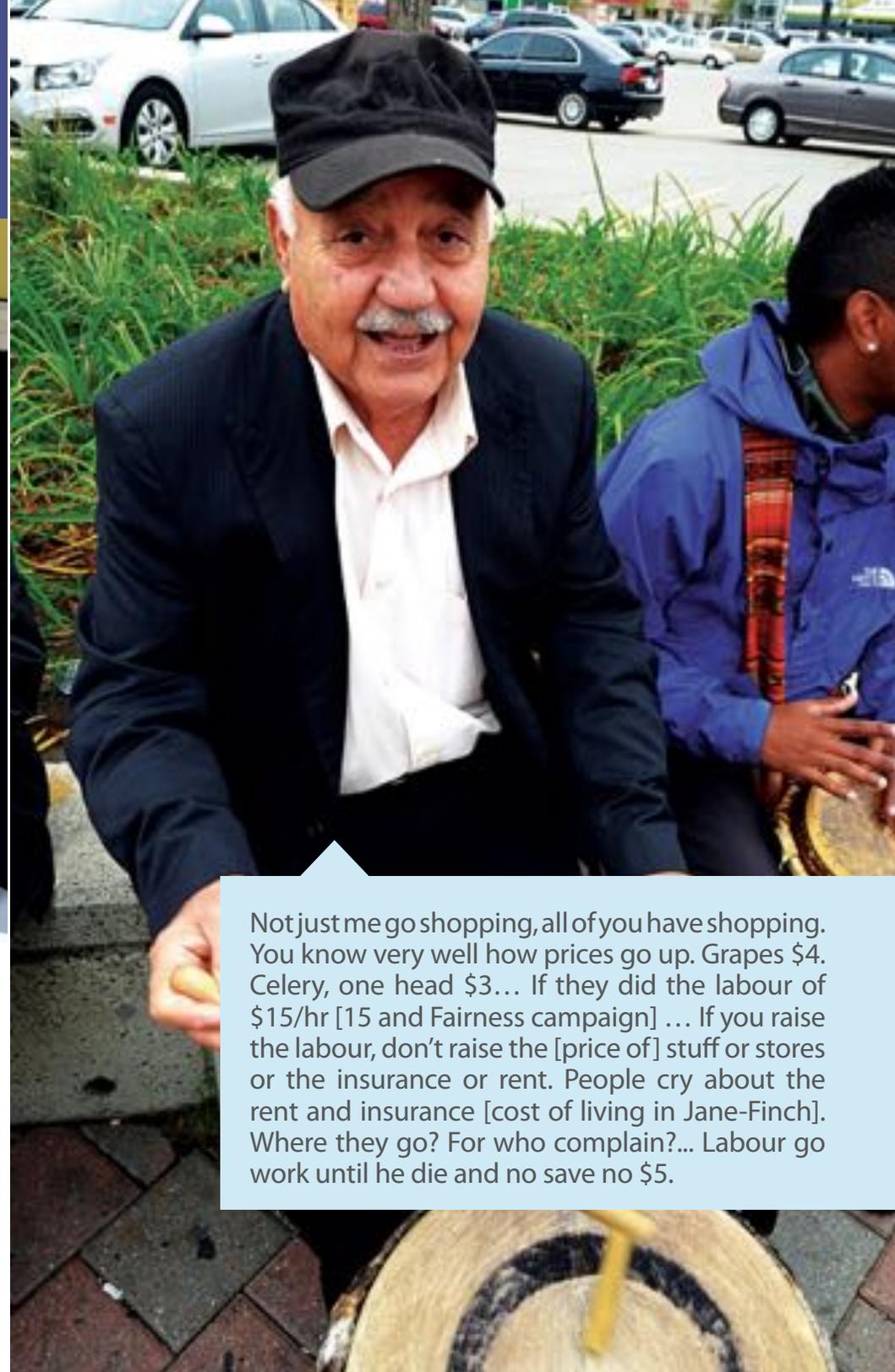
We planned a total of five radio shows that focused on the five theme groups outlined in this report and common to the two projects below (food and the environment; food, labour and migration; food, policing and race and culture; food, mental health, gender and body image; and food, capitalism, Power and money).

In conjunction with Community Conversations, the idea of the radio show was to create an accessible space for those who could not attend community meetings by providing them with the ability to listen in on such discussions and debates from their homes, work, or anywhere that they had access to a radio.

# HUMANS OF BLACK CREEK



The Humans of Black Creek photo series was created as a way of engaging with the community on the topic of Food Justice in a way that went deeper than conversations. By capturing images of residents and pairing the images with quotes from them, we are putting faces to the concerns identified by the Jane-Finch community.



Not just me go shopping, all of you have shopping. You know very well how prices go up. Grapes \$4. Celery, one head \$3... If they did the labour of \$15/hr [15 and Fairness campaign] ... If you raise the labour, don't raise the [price of] stuff or stores or the insurance or rent. People cry about the rent and insurance [cost of living in Jane-Finch]. Where they go? For who complain?... Labour go work until he die and no save no \$5.

## MAJOR ISSUE: FOOD AND THE CITY



*How is it for you getting to and from the grocery store?*

I take the bus. My joints don't work because I have rheumatoid arthritis really badly so I can't do a lot of walking. Sometimes I walk to the Chinese store because you can get vegetables a little bit cheaper, but they are not that fresh. I end up going to FreshCo or No Frills and I have to take the bus because taking back the stuff and having to pull the cart... I've been hurting for years now. It's difficult because I don't drive and that's where the problem lies, the cost of transportation, then the cost of food; everything is going up. It is very difficult.

- Marcia

The built environment of Jane-Finch itself was named by community members as a challenge to food access. Many of the residents in Jane-Finch, especially in high-rise apartments and in community housing, do not have consistent access to a vehicle and this poses significant challenges to acquiring food.

A 'need' expressed by residents was to improve the physical process of getting to and from food centers.

Strengths in the community are the amount of potential food-growing space, including parks, the Hydro corridor, and the Black Creek Community Farm. However, the challenge remains in accessing that land for growing, especially for community groups and individuals.

## MAJOR ISSUE: FOOD, LABOUR, AND MIGRATION



*What is food like back home versus here in Toronto?*

“Here it’s so different, you have to shop, buy everything. Back home it’s organic, like if you want any fruits, we have the variety, anything you go to the yard and pick, pineapple, plantain, whatever provision. But here it’s different. It’s not like back home...So I lose out on that so much, I miss that every time I talk about it.”

- Lovin

Locally, residents expressed that the high rate of temporary/ agency work in this community, and other precarious forms of labour, contribute to food insecurity by providing a low wage, not providing health benefits, and not offering consistent hours or income.

Thus, there is a strong need for better employment opportunities that are more secure and obtaining an increase in minimum wage to a living wage.

Additionally, through discussions with community members, we learned more about the situation of migrant workers working in Canada who grow, harvest, and pack a great deal of our ‘local’ food and how they are exploited.

## MAJOR ISSUE: FOOD, POLICING, AND RACE AND CULTURE



The intersections between food, policing, and race was an area that community members had unique insights to offer by raising issues that are mostly absent in the larger food justice movement.

When discussing what food justice means to them, many community members made the connection to the criminalization of poverty and race and how that connects to accessing food.

Specifically, community members outlined the following issues: being followed in the grocery store; being searched and detained for suspicion of stealing food; the fact that our local grocery stores have security systems and undercovers while grocery stores in wealthier more white areas do not; and finally, the locking up of baby food.

The constant state of policing and surveillance in Jane-Finch, which residents also connected to the issue of police harassment and carding, is not usually considered a food access issue, but we believe this must be reconsidered.

All of these issues in our local grocery stores represent additional challenges the community faces in accessing food.

**MAJOR ISSUE:  
FOOD, MENTAL HEALTH, GENDER,  
AND BODY IMAGE**



Organic food would be good if we can get some of those organic foods to buy. Other places if they can have a little market, once or twice a week... the organic food is good, right? It's better than those herbicides and pesticides on the fruits and vegetables. It's a little more expensive, but I'd prefer to have that...It's totally worth it.

*So having more frequent small markets, in walking distance, that would help?*

That would be great.

- Savita

On the topic of food, mental health, gender and body image, the community made it clear that it is important to broaden and deepen understandings of the connections between food and health.

For example, diabetes is an urgent concern in this community, and represents an underlying problem of people not being able to access healthy and affordable food, but often the conversation about food and health stops here.

Through community discussions, residents mentioned that racism, as well as not being able to afford healthy food, can contribute to mental health problems, as both contribute to major sources of stress and hardship.

Residents also expressed concerns that artificial chemical products in foods, especially processed foods that kids and youth primarily eat, made people less healthy mentally and physically.

Significant anxiety was expressed by the community around not trusting the foods they are eating to be healthy and safe, raising issues of genetic modification of food, chemical and preservative additives, and pesticides.

More often than we would like to think, our seniors are in the position of choosing between food and their medication, which poses a significant challenge in and of itself, however, many community members are also taking medications that must be taken with food, posing an impossible dilemma.

You have to choose...I used to work with the elderly people. And a lot of elderly people, a lot of us, have to choose between the food and our medication, and a lot of the time you don't eat much because you have to buy medication, you have to buy medication because you will die without the medication.

- Maize Blanchard



## MAJOR ISSUE: FOOD, CAPITALISM AND MONEY



*Is it challenging for you to access the kind of food you would like to feed your family?*

Everything get a bit expensive, since the money is down, the price is up. So we find it very hard, to do groceries, and fruits and vegetables, kind of tough...I cut down on the items, instead of buying 5 or 6 oranges, I buy 4. Apples, instead of buying 5 I buy 3, I cut down, because of the prices...I have to conserve. It is hard to stretch it...I have to pay all the bills, I pay rent, I pay hydro, I find it very hard, because I have to cut on the items, cut on cooking and eating to pay the rent...If the pay is higher, then you could afford, but the pay remains low and the items go up, so you kind of strain.

- Sandra

Healthy, organic, culturally appropriate food is significantly more expensive than processed foods, and opportunities to get it in Black Creek are very limited.

The main grocery stores carry very limited selections of organic foods and cost is often prohibitive. When food prices rise, it hits Black Creek residents very hard. Even as food prices increase, peoples' wages have remained stagnant or are even decreasing, further squeezing low-income families

Many community members face challenges in stretching their monthly income to cover all of the necessities and have to prioritize needs between food, rent and transportation.

Community members also expressed the desire to have better mechanisms to hold governments' agencies, institutions and other organizations who work in the community accountable, including organizations doing food growing and food access work.

# FOOD JUSTICE DAY OF ACTION



On September 12, 2015, the Black Creek Food Justice Network took to the streets with over 100 protestors and supporters to assert the human right of access to healthy food.

The slogan “Food as a Human Right” broadly captured the demands and recommendations put forth by the Jane-Finch community to address Food Justice in low-income and racialized communities. The Day of Action began at noon with a rally at the corner of Jane and Finch where enthusiastic drummers and speakers charged-up the crowd before marching up Jane Street towards the Driftwood Community Centre for a panel discussion and a community meal.

The hope is for the community to take ownership of these plots, cultivate food in public spaces, and expand the revolutionary gardening initiative to include partnerships with schools. Based on the success of this initiative, there is potential for the Black Creek Food Justice Network to turn this into a bi-annual event (gardening and harvesting) to further promote food justice in the Jane-Finch area.



## PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel focused on food justice and featured members of the Toronto Food Policy Council, Justice 4 Migrant Workers, Network for the Elimination of Police Violence, Jane Finch Action Against Poverty, Workers' Action Centre, National Farmers Union, and Justice 4 Migrant Workers.



## REVOLUTIONARY GARDENING

The rally successfully shut down traffic along Jane Street as participants marched with signs bearing slogans demanding food justice, occasionally stopping to create "revolutionary gardens". Revolutionary gardening is the innovative practice of taking back public green space to grow healthy food in the community, for the community.

**CONCLUSION:**  
**NEEDS, STRENGTHS  
AND CONTINUED  
INJUSTICES**

The strength of the community is demonstrated numerous ways including in its ability to mobilize around the injustices they face. There is an expansive network of residents and grassroots organizations that are willing and eager to address the inequitable food systems that continue to persist.

However, a lot more still needs to be done. Community members continue to face increasing poverty, high unemployment and underemployment, low wages, soaring food prices and struggling with a lack of access to healthy, affordable and culturally relevant food. They are policed in grocery stores and throughout the community and have very limited access to affordable transportation to reach food sources.

Through community meetings, the Food Frequency Radio show, the Humans of Black Creek Photo Series and general community engagement we heard the voices of the community.



**The time to develop real solutions is now.** The Food Justice Project plans to do just this. We aim to disseminate the findings of this report throughout the community and develop actions that directly respond to the demands and recommendations put forward by the community. An example of such a pilot program is the creation of the Garden Resource Network which seeks to provide accessible information, tools, and other resources on gardening and guerilla gardening to residents. This program will partner with food justice organizations that endorse the community's demands (and meets other requirements).

The driving force of the future of our project (and pilot programs) comes directly from the demands and recommendations put forward by the community, which are broadly grouped according to the themes suggested on the next page.

# DEMANDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Improve Growing Spaces and Support for Urban Growing

1. Make City Parks and Hydro Corridors accessible for community residents to garden and grow food
2. Create, fund and maintain a garden in every school
3. Assure core funding from all levels of government for organizations doing food justice and urban agriculture work so that they can be sustainable

## Make Food More Affordable by Raising Wages and Social Safety Nets

1. Increase and maintain the minimum wage at a liveable wage rate or a basic guaranteed income
2. Raise Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works rates

## Fight for Justice for the People that Work to Feed Us

1. Support migrant farm workers' political demands, which include a) access to landed status upon arrival; b) a permanent residency regularization program for those already in Canada, c) equal access to all social programs; d) a fair appeal process before any repatriation order; and e) full protections under the provincial Employment Standards Act and Regulations
2. Subsidize small farmers and promote ecologically informed farming policies that support young, new, and racialized farmers.

## Stop Criminalizing Our Communities

1. Remove security guards and undercover police from grocery stores in predominantly racialized and working-class communities (high-income and/or largely white neighbourhoods do not have visible security presence)

## Connect Food and Health

1. Make healthy food more accessible to people with mental and physical health challenges
2. Mandate published images be representative of a variety of bodies, body shapes, sizes and skin tones.



If you are interested in getting involved with the **Black Creek Food Justice Network** or simply want more information please email: [blackcreekfoodjustice@gmail.com](mailto:blackcreekfoodjustice@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook - **Black Creek Food Justice Network**