

Exploring Food Insecurity in Maine

Calvin Soule, 2020

This summer I built off of my work last summer by continuing to do social science research. After conducting some interviews last summer related to food insecurity in Maine and knowing that Maine is one of the most food insecure states in the country, I decided to explore what farmers, stakeholders, and organizations were addressing this pressing issue. In doing so, I hoped to learn what was working well, what was not, and to collect social interview data along the way. A particular focus of the summer became the intersection of food insecurity and schools in Maine- as children are the most food insecure demographic.

For my research methods, my goal was to talk to as many people as possible connected to the issue of food insecurity. This included farms that dedicated to all their means of production to food banks, organizations that ran food drives and provided students with food, gleaners, school social workers who provided firsthand accounts of how pervasive and impactful school food insecurity is, and even parent volunteers. For my interview process, I first would have to reach out to the individual(s) that I was hoping to speak to and find a time to meet. For the interview, I would prepare a few questions or general topics that I wanted to discuss- but most of the questions I would ask would be based on what they talked about from my initial questions. At the interview, I would tell them the IRB protocol and then start the interview, recording as I went, as well as taking notes by hand. Later, these notes would be digitized, the interview would be transcribed, and any pictures (also used as a form of data) would be uploaded. In order to make this data accessible to future social science researchers, I also spent time organization the data/providing summaries of why each contact might be useful as well as cataloging any future research project ideas we thought of.

This research was done as part of a research co-lab with Dr. Shana Starobin. The goal of this social science “lab” is to encourage collaboration across disciplines in the environmental field. I spent part of my summer collaborating with Eleanor Paasche, who I helped conduct interviews and research related to the Dairy Industry. I realized the value of having two interviewers and having two perspectives to interpret data in the field. As part of this summer I also attended an Oral History and Interview Workshop in which I learned about other ways interviews can be used in research, and what “best-in-practice” interview techniques are, which I will help incorporate as the standard practices for future researchers in the Co-Lab.

Through this summer work, I have realized my passions for engaging with people who are making a difference, and connecting with people and organizations in my home state. I look forward to reflecting on this summer more as I begin my senior year and try to figure out the next steps in my academic or professional career.

Faculty Mentor: Shana Starobin

Funded by the Cooke Environmental Research Fellowship