

Abstract

Food assistance is one form of aid that people in poverty can use to lighten the load of financial stress and ensure that they can maintain a nutritious, sustaining diet. Food pantries are a common final distribution site of food assistance where people experiencing food insecurity can receive free food. Previous research has begun to determine how the preferences of food pantry clients can better inform how pantries are structured and what food is stocked in them. This previous work has highlighted the ways that pantry clients are constrained in their ability to choose what to eat because of a need to visit a pantry. However, there is a gap in knowledge of how food assistance as an institutionalized system plays a role in shaping what food even makes its way to pantry shelves. Using in-depth interviews with 14 employees of food pantries and the main food bank in Columbus, Ohio, this study maps a new understanding of the nuanced path that food takes from production to donation. In doing so, we are able to see the influence of neoliberal ideology that promotes poverty governance and stigmatization of poverty that even fundamentally shapes what food is donated to food assistance and how pantries that distribute it are modeled. In applying the influence of neoliberalism on the food assistance system, a new concept of food governance is developed. Analysis reveals ways in which it can be combated on a local level to move food assistance to be more representative of elements of food sovereignty and food justice.