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Food Vulnerability of Poor Households in Densely Populated Urban Areas

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Abstract

This article develops a conceptual discussion of household food security among urban poor families who live in dense settlements without access to productive land. The paper describes how dependence on purchased food, unstable earnings from informal or low paid work, and limited housing facilities combine to shape fragile daily food practices. It explores the ways in which income volatility, rising living costs, and restrictive urban space reduce the capacity of low income households to secure adequate and nutritious meals for all members. Attention is given to intra household decision making, storage and cooking constraints, and the role of neighbourhood support networks under continuous economic pressure. The discussion also highlights intergenerational consequences of insufficient diets and the psychological burden carried by caregivers who struggle to provide food. By linking urban poverty, labour conditions, and everyday food management, the article offers a conceptual frame for understanding household food security in large cities and for informing public policies that aim to protect the right to adequate food for vulnerable urban populations.

Keywords: urban poor, household food security, urban poverty, informal work, food access, housing conditions, daily food practices.

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Introduction

Changes in the structure of urban space bring fundamental consequences for the way households obtain and manage food. The global process of urbanization has shifted spatial functions from production toward consumption, causing modern cities to become increasingly dependent on external food distribution systems. This transformation is consistent with the analysis of Henri Lefebvre (1991), which explains that the production of modern urban space tends to be dominated by economic and commercial interests rather than social reproduction functions such as food production. The growth of dense settlements, vertical apartments, and informal areas around urban infrastructure demonstrates how urban space is constructed for housing and economic activities rather than for local food sustainability. Under these conditions, food primarily appears as a market commodity obtained through retail networks, traditional markets, and modern logistics distribution. Urban household food security therefore depends heavily on purchasing power, price stability, and the smooth functioning of supply chains. Poor households in densely populated urban areas face dependence on long supply chains that lie beyond their control, making vulnerability to price fluctuations and uncertainty in informal employment key factors in fulfilling daily food needs, as explained by Amartya Sen (1981) through the entitlement approach which emphasizes that hunger often arises not from the physical absence of food but from limited economic access to it.

Life in large cities is often viewed as a space of opportunity that provides access to employment, education, and public services. However, research on urban poverty shows that cities also create new forms of vulnerability for the poor. Mike Davis (2006) describes the expansion of urban poor settlements as a consequence of urbanization without adequate social infrastructure support, including household food systems. Limited living space, inadequate cooking facilities, and increasing reliance on cheap ready to eat food become adaptive strategies among the urban poor. Practices such as purchasing food in small quantities with high frequency, choosing food items based on daily prices, and relying on informal vendors represent forms of economic rationality among low income households. This perspective aligns with the findings of Janet Poppendieck (1998), who shows that food

consumption decisions among the poor are not free choices among healthy alternatives but rather the result of ongoing negotiations between limited income, working time, and family nutritional needs.

Food security conceptually consists of three main dimensions: food availability, access, and utilization. In rural areas, food availability can be strengthened through household production, family farming, or home gardens. In contrast, poor urban households depend almost entirely on the market as their main source of food. Access to food is strongly influenced by income stability, which is often daily and uncertain, as emphasized by Amartya Sen (1981), who states that food security is closely related to the ability to obtain food rather than the mere existence of food itself. Food utilization is then influenced by housing conditions, storage capacity, food processing practices, and the distribution of consumption within the family. In this context, food security among poor urban households resembles a continuous process of adaptation to close vulnerability gaps amid the high cost of urban living and the instability of informal economies, as analyzed in global urban food system studies by Tim Lang and Michael Heasman (2015).

Poor urban households generally rely on low wage work, daily labor, or informal employment with long working hours (Suárez et al., 2016). Income patterns that fluctuate from day to day make long term food planning difficult. When income declines, food expenditure becomes the quickest area for adjustment, either through reducing quantity, lowering quality, or replacing menus with cheaper and less nutritious foods. Employment uncertainty combines with food price uncertainty that can increase rapidly. In this situation of uncertainty, poor households develop various coping strategies, such as borrowing from small shops, sharing food with neighbors, or reducing adult meal portions to maintain children's intake. These coping mechanisms reflect daily struggles to maintain minimal food security.

Large cities also present a paradox between availability and access (Guida & Caglioni, 2020). In one area there may be modern markets offering a wide variety of high quality food products, while nearby alleys are inhabited by families who struggle to regularly purchase fresh food. The physical distance to food sources may not be far, but the socio economic distance is considerable. For poor households, prices,

transportation costs, and travel time to markets are important considerations. Many choose to buy food from small neighborhood shops or mobile vendors near their homes, even though product choices are more limited and prices are relatively higher. This situation indicates that food security among poor households in large cities cannot be understood solely from the physical availability of food within the urban area, but must also consider how the spatial and economic structures of cities shape their patterns of access and consumption.

The problems that arise from this situation relate to the vulnerability that continually shadows the food lives of poor households in urban areas (Kimani-Murage et al., 2014). Their full dependence on the market makes them highly sensitive to changes in prices and availability. They do not have sufficient food reserves, either in the form of household stocks or alternative sources of production. Weak bargaining positions in the labor market increase the risk of losing income when economic, health, or policy disruptions occur. In such circumstances, food security is not a stable condition but a situation that can quickly shift into food insecurity. Poor households live within a narrow margin between having enough food for today and worrying about whether tomorrow they will be able to provide adequate meals for all family members.

Another issue concerns the quality of food consumed by poor households in urban areas (Diehl et al., 2019). The prices of nutritious foods such as animal protein, fresh vegetables, and fruits are often higher than foods rich in carbohydrates and fats that are sold cheaply. Under the pressure of limited income, poor households tend to prioritize satiety and practicality, making it difficult to consistently achieve balanced nutritional intake. In addition, limited kitchen space and inadequate cooking equipment encourage dependence on ready to eat foods sold around residential areas. This pattern has the potential to create long term health problems, such as malnutrition, metabolic diseases, and reduced productive capacity. Such nutritional vulnerability is part of food security that is often overlooked when the measurement used focuses only on the presence of food on the plate (Noack & Pouw, 2015).

The urgency of studying food security among poor households in urban areas arises from the consideration that the proportion of urban populations continues to increase, and some of them live in layered

poverty. Food policies and assistance programs are often designed at the macro level, such as national stock regulation or price stabilization, while the daily dynamics of poor households in narrow urban alleys remain conceptually underexplored (Dixon & Richards, 2016). Without a structured understanding of how they access, manage, and consume food, efforts to improve food security risk remaining at aggregate figures that conceal vulnerabilities at the household level. A focused literature review can help construct a framework of thought about the relationship between urban structure, poverty, and food security, allowing this issue to receive proportional attention in urban development planning.

The purpose of writing this article is to develop a systematic conceptual description of food security among poor households in urban areas that do not have access to productive land. This paper aims to explain how the structure of urban space, forms of urban work, and urban poverty influence the ability of poor households to obtain, manage, and consume sufficient and adequate food. From a theoretical perspective, this study is expected to enrich discussions of food security by incorporating the dimension of urban vulnerability experienced by poor families living in densely populated environments. From a practical perspective, the structured explanation is expected to serve as a conceptual reference for policymakers and social program practitioners when designing interventions that are more precisely targeted at poor households in large cities.

Method

This article is prepared using a qualitative literature study approach that focuses on building a conceptual framework regarding food security among poor households in urban areas. Bryman (2016) states that social research requires clarity in research design from the outset, including when the main sources used are written works. Within this framework, the author formulates research questions, develops keywords, and selects literature related to urban poverty, households, and food security. The selected literature is then read critically to identify key categories, relationships between concepts, and assumptions that are often hidden in nationally oriented food security discourse. This approach creates an

opportunity to shift the focus of discussion from aggregate figures toward the experiences of poor families living in fragile urban environments.

Privitera and Ahlgrim Delzell (2018) emphasize that research methods in education and the social sciences require careful understanding of how researchers connect theory with practical issues. Referring to this view, this literature study does not stop at explaining definitions but seeks to construct a line of argument that connects theoretical debates about food security with the realities of poor households in cities. The reading sources are grouped according to themes, including writings on the dynamics of urban poverty, studies on households as units of analysis, and conceptual ideas of food security at the family level. From this grouping, a framework of discussion is developed that begins with a general overview of food security, shifts to the specific problems of poor households in large cities without productive land, and then formulates conceptual implications for food policy planning.

Result and Discussion

Food security among poor households in urban areas can be understood as the ability of families to ensure the availability, access, and consumption of sufficient and adequate food in a sustainable manner, amid limited economic resources and space. In urban environments, food primarily appears as a purchased commodity, so the function of food production is removed from the everyday living space of poor families. This differs from households in rural areas that still have the opportunity to grow some of their food needs in home gardens or rented land. The absence of productive land makes poor urban households rely entirely on income obtained from work, social assistance, or support from social networks. The living conditions of urban communities are often influenced by economic changes and social mobility dynamics that differ from those of rural communities, requiring families to continuously adjust their survival strategies (Amri & Khayru, 2021; Mardikaningsih, 2021). This strong dependence on the market makes their food security highly sensitive to price changes and disruptions in sources of income (Zezza & Tasciotti, 2010; Orsini et al., 2013).

The absence of productive land is not merely the lack of a piece of land, but the loss of an important dimension in household survival strategies. Land, however small, allows households to manage a small space to grow vegetables or raise small livestock. In large cities, available land is more often allocated for buildings and commercial infrastructure, while poor families live in housing where nearly all space is used for living and basic activities. Limited space in urban areas is also often related to patterns of social segregation and spatial inequality that develop in large cities (Fauzi, 2021). In such conditions, the idea of household food reserves originating from self harvest is difficult to realize. Food security ultimately depends on the ability to arrange household expenditure and utilize every opportunity for income, without a buffer in the form of self production that could reduce financial pressure (Battersby, 2011).

The characteristics of urban employment accessed by poor households also influence their food security. Many family members are involved in informal sectors such as small scale traders, porters, drivers, domestic workers, or daily laborers. These jobs often do not provide guaranteed wages and are not protected by formal contracts. Income depends on the number of customers, projects obtained, or daily demand. Individual behavior in making daily economic decisions is often influenced by work experience, social organizational conditions, and the way individuals interpret their working environment (Darmawan, 2013). When demand declines, income immediately decreases, reducing the ability to purchase food. The absence of adequate social protection increases the risk of falling into food insecurity when work disruptions occur due to illness, accidents, or changes in urban spatial policies. Thus, the structure of the urban labor market becomes one of the key factors determining the stability of food security among poor households.

Food consumption patterns among poor households in large cities are usually formed through decisions strongly influenced by price and time availability (Rischke et al., 2015). Daily income encourages the habit of purchasing food ingredients in small quantities or buying ready to eat meals. Practical considerations often outweigh nutritional considerations, especially when family members work long hours and travel long distances. In modern societies, technological developments and changes in lifestyle also influence how individuals determine their daily consumption choices

(Darmawan et al., 2021). Food menus revolve around ingredients that are cheap, filling, and easily obtained around residential areas. Variations in nutrient rich food ingredients are difficult to achieve consistently. Thus, food security in terms of caloric adequacy may be maintained near the minimum threshold, but nutritional quality often fluctuates according to changes in income and prices.

The density of poor settlements in urban areas presents additional obstacles to food security (Tacoli, 2020). Storage space in homes is very limited, making it difficult to store food in large quantities. Limited kitchen facilities, such as cooking equipment and refrigerators, restrict options for processing and storing fresh food ingredients. As a result, households rely more on durable food items, even though their nutritional value is often lower. Rapid urbanization without equal distribution of urban facilities often widens social inequality among groups in cities (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). Limited access to clean water and proper sanitation also affects the safety of food prepared and consumed (Dos Santos et al., 2017). In this situation, food security cannot be separated from housing conditions. Houses that are narrow and unhealthy reduce the ability of families to process and store food in ways that are safe and nutritious.

The social dimension of communities in poor settlements provides another perspective in the discussion of food security (Sonnino et al., 2016). On the one hand, social networks of neighbors and relatives become an important source of support when households face food shortages. Practices such as sharing food, borrowing money, or giving food to a neighbor's hungry child are forms of solidarity that are often found. In many local communities, values of togetherness and local wisdom often become important strengths in facing various limitations of life (Nurmalasari & Nuraini, 2021). On the other hand, these social networks are also eroded by continuous economic pressure. When many households are in similar vulnerable situations, the collective ability to help one another becomes limited. In the long term, solidarity networks that are exhausted by economic pressures may experience erosion, thereby reducing informal protection against food insecurity.

Food security among poor households in urban areas is also related to knowledge and food management practices at the family level

(Gunawardhana & Ginigaddara, 2021). Knowledge about balanced nutrition, ways to select healthier food ingredients within limited budgets, and simple processing techniques that maintain nutritional value greatly influence consumption patterns. However, knowledge alone is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by the availability of affordable food ingredients and a supportive environment. In many families, women play an important role in managing household expenditures and determining daily family consumption patterns (Halizah & Nuraini, 2021). Many mothers in poor settlements understand the importance of vegetables and fruits but face the reality that the prices of these products are higher than starchy and sugary foods. In such conditions, food security becomes a struggle between ideal knowledge and real limitations, which often creates feelings of anxiety and guilt among household food managers (Leung et al., 2020).

Full dependence on the market makes poor urban households vulnerable to price volatility (Ruel et al., 2010). Even small increases in staple food prices can drastically shift the composition of household expenditures. Other expenditure items such as education, health, and transportation must be reduced in order to maintain the ability to purchase minimal food needs. Changes in consumer behavior and market dynamics also often influence how people determine their choices among products available in the market (Negara et al., 2021). When these adjustments are insufficient, the available options often involve reducing meal portions, lowering food quality, or delaying meals. Price vulnerability becomes more severe when households have no financial reserves or assets to sell. Thus, food price stability and policies related to food distribution have direct implications for food security among poor households in large cities.

The generational dimension is also important in discussing food security among poor households in urban areas (Alderete et al., 2018). Children who grow up in households with inadequate nutritional intake are at risk of experiencing developmental disorders that ultimately affect their learning abilities and employment opportunities in the future. Some social studies explain that economic vulnerability can create a cycle of vulnerability that continues to repeat if social protection systems are unable to effectively reach vulnerable groups (Aidan Bin Abdullah, 2021).

This cycle has the potential to reproduce poverty across generations. Food security is not merely an issue of meeting today's needs but also has long term consequences for the quality of human resources (Chilton et al., 2017). When poor households must choose between fulfilling children's nutritional needs and other necessities such as school expenses, the decisions made reflect the structural pressures they face. Conceptual studies on food security need to capture this long term time dimension.

Social policies and urban governance also influence the space for poor households to fulfill their food needs (Smit, 2016). Spatial planning that displaces informal settlements without providing adequate housing alternatives can disrupt household access to local market networks and community support that have long sustained them. Community involvement in social and political life also often becomes an important factor in strengthening social solidarity amid changes in urban policies (Rojak et al., 2021). Policies that encourage the growth of large retail businesses without considering small traders can alter food distribution patterns in urban neighborhoods. For poor households, these structural changes are often not accompanied by improvements in economic capacity. As a result, they face a new food environment with economic rules that do not always favor their interests as low income consumers (Hough & Sosa, 2015).

It is also important to observe how food security discourse at the national level often focuses on production and availability at a large scale. Various social and political dynamics in modern societies also show that issues of public welfare cannot be separated from processes of social integration and evolving global challenges (Fariz, 2021). The success of food programs is measured through production volume, planting area, or stock stability. Meanwhile, the question of whether poor households in narrow urban alleys can purchase food at affordable prices, process it properly, and consume it adequately receives less attention. Food security viewed from a macro perspective risks obscuring vulnerabilities at the household level, especially in urban areas where food access depends entirely on market mechanisms (Dixon & Richards, 2016). Literature studies on poor households in cities can help shift some focus toward the micro unit of analysis without ignoring broader structural dimensions.

Within the framework of social justice theory, food security among poor households in cities touches on the basic right of citizens to adequate, safe, and nutritious food (Meenar & Hoover, 2012). This right should not depend on land ownership or bargaining power in the market but should be guaranteed through governance that provides space for vulnerable groups (Engelstad, 2015). When poor households continually live on the brink of food shortage, it indicates a failure in the economic and social arrangements of the city. Discussions of food security need to be linked to questions about who bears the burden of the risks of scarcity and high prices, and how mechanisms of social solidarity are designed in urban environments structured by diverse economic interests.

The connection between food security and gender in poor urban households cannot be ignored. The management of household spending and food provision in many poor families is generally carried out by women, both as housewives and as income earning workers (Beatty et al., 2021). They arrange menus, measure budgets, and bear the emotional burden when food supplies run low. At the same time, women are often involved in small economic activities such as selling food or working in the informal sector. This double burden makes food security simultaneously an additional workload for women. Discussions of food security among poor urban households need to give space to women's experiences as the primary managers of family food consumption.

Another interesting aspect is the role of local knowledge and the creativity of poor households in managing food (Mungmachon, 2012). Many families develop simple recipes using inexpensive ingredients that are processed into dishes acceptable to all family members. They also develop habits of reprocessing leftover food so that it is not wasted. This knowledge shows that poor households are not merely passive recipients of structural conditions but actors who attempt to organize their lives as best as possible within limited space. However, this creativity has its limits. When economic pressure and rising prices exceed their capacity to adjust, food vulnerability becomes more acute again.

Food security among poor households in cities is also influenced by access to information (Thompson et al., 2020). Information about food prices, assistance programs, and ways to manage nutrition affects household decisions. However, not all families have equal access to reliable

information. Many policies are disseminated through official channels that are difficult for residents of informal settlements to reach. On the other hand, information in mass media and social media often focuses on middle class consumption patterns that do not match the economic capacity of poor households. This information gap can reinforce feelings of marginalization and reduce the capacity of households to make better food related decisions.

The psychological aspects of food vulnerability also deserve attention. Uncertainty about the availability of food for the next day creates a continuous burden of worry for heads of households and food managers (Kneafsey et al., 2013). Feelings of anxiety and shame when unable to provide adequate food for children and other family members can affect mental health. This pressure often does not appear in economic indicators but influences the quality of interactions within the household. Thus, food security among poor households in cities includes an emotional dimension that is often overlooked in policy readings that tend to be number oriented.

From a spatial dimension, the location of poor settlements within the urban structure influences patterns of food access (Jeong & Liu, 2020). Settlements located near traditional markets or food distribution centers may find it easier to obtain fresh food ingredients at relatively affordable prices. In contrast, settlements located on the outskirts or separated by urban infrastructure have more limited access and higher transportation costs. Changes in spatial planning, such as the construction of toll roads or new commercial areas, can shift food distribution flows and affect the position of poor settlements within these networks. Understanding food security in large cities requires attention to how urban space is organized and who benefits or is disadvantaged by these arrangements.

In discussions of sustainable development, food security among poor urban households needs to be seen as an integral part of the urban poverty alleviation agenda (Dolley et al., 2020; Mkwambisi et al., 2011). Fragile food security worsens social and economic vulnerability, hampers productivity, and reduces the quality of human resources. Conversely, improving food security among poor households has the potential to become a foundation for increasing their capacity to take advantage of economic opportunities in cities. However, for this potential to be realized,

a clear understanding is required of the survival logic of poor families within urban structures that are more often organized for the interests of investment and capital mobility.

Conceptually, food security among poor households in urban areas lies at the intersection of the city's economic structure, spatial planning, social networks, and family dynamics. Poor households must navigate fluctuating food prices, unstable incomes, cramped living spaces, and limited support networks. They combine wage labor, small businesses, social assistance, and neighborhood solidarity to ensure that the dining table does not remain empty. In this struggle, every small decision about what to buy, when to cook, and how to distribute food becomes part of the effort to maintain food security. Literature studies that highlight these experiences help fill the gap in discussions of food security that have so far tended to focus more on the scale of production and national supply.

Conclusion

Social media has significantly transformed the ways young people write, read, and interpret literature. Digital platforms provide broad spaces for expression, encouraging the emergence of digital literary forms that are concise, interactive, and multimodal. Young people act as both writers and readers who are interconnected, building communities and identities through poetry, short prose, and serialized narratives circulating on their feeds. However, these changes occur within an ecosystem regulated by algorithms and the attention economy, meaning that youth literary practices cannot be separated from the pressures of numbers and virality. The tension between expanded access and concerns about the shallowness of reading experiences marks a new phase in the relationship between younger generations and literature, requiring careful and nuanced conceptual interpretation.

The implications of this study point to the need to reformulate how we understand youth literature in the digital era. Researchers and educators need to integrate an understanding of digital literature into academic discourse and educational practices while maintaining attention to the aesthetic and reflective aspects that form the core of literature. Community activists and creative industry practitioners can utilize these conceptual findings to design mentoring spaces that encourage

experimentation without being fully trapped in the logic of metrics and popularity. Suggestions for future research include developing empirical studies that examine the concrete practices of young writers and readers across various platforms, as well as comparative studies between digital works and printed works produced by the same generation. In this way, discussions on social media and youth literature can develop on a solid and dialogical theoretical foundation.

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