Can Community Gardens Improve Food Banks and Food Centers? Lessons from two Southwestern Ontario cases

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Abstract

This thesis examines the efforts of the Local Community Food Center in Stratford, Ontario and the Women’s Rural Resource Center in Strathroy, Ontario to establish community gardening programs. The research centers on qualitative interviews with 9 key informants and 16 participants conducted from June to August of 2019, as well as participant observation in the gardens and the day-to-day operations of the institutions. The primary aim of this research was to understand how relationships between food banks, food centers, and community gardens function, and how community gardens can affect the food choices of regular users of food banks and food centers. It also explores the motivations for establishing and joining the community gardens, how participants view food from the community gardens, and why some participants are more engaged in community gardening than others. The analysis also considers the perceived health benefits of engagement in community gardens, as well as some of the limitations of community gardens for the organizations, garden participants, and food bank and food center users. A central conclusion is that while the volume of production from community gardens is not at a scale that can have significant impacts on the food security of participants, there are some significant positive individual and communal health benefits that are worthy of attention and suggest reasons why food banks and food centers should consider building these relationships wherever possible.

Keywords: Community Gardens; Food Banks and Food Centers; Fresh Food; Health Impacts of Community Gardening; Sense of Place.
Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis studied the efforts of the Local Community Food Center, which is a food center that offers cooking classes, gardening workshops, and an affordable produce market for members of the Stratford, Ontario community, and the Women’s Rural Resource Center, which is a women’s shelter that includes a food bank and a community garden for women in Strathroy, Ontario, to establish community gardening programs. The research centers on qualitative interviews with 9 key informants (which involve directors of the food banks, food centers, and community gardens) and 16 participants (which include users of the food banks, food centers, and community gardens) conducted from June to August of 2019. Qualitative interviews were best suited for this study because they could provide an in-depth understanding of the views, experiences, and motivations behind the community gardening initiatives at each case study site, as well as participant observation, which involves spending a significant amount of time at case study sites and engaging in activities with participants to understand day-to-day operations and build rapport with participants. The general aim of this research was to understand why community gardens at each case study site were established, why some participants are more engaged in gardening than others, and how active garden participants perceived the mental and physical health benefits of community gardening.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Food Banks and Food Centers in a Rich Country: The Canadian Context

Although Canada is one of the wealthiest nations in the world and runs large agricultural surpluses, this does not mean that everyone is food secure. As Mikkonen and Raphael (2010:5) argue, Canada’s wealth often serves “to mask the reality of [widespread] poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, [and] the erosion of employment quality.” Social inequality is powerfully reflected in uneven access to food, as many low-income people cannot afford to consistently buy healthy, fresh produce at the grocery store, and are forced to stretch their limited food budgets further by relying on cheaper processed and packaged food. At the bottom of the income spectrum, economic barriers to accessing healthy fresh produce are compounded by other dynamics, including the widespread lack of food literacy, food preparation skills, proper kitchen equipment, housing, and for some, poor oral health. While many Canadians take purchasing food for granted, and feel little stress about its preparation, on the farthest margins of Canadian society people with meagre food budgets struggle to even access the grocery store and must plan their days around where their next meal is coming from, moving between food banks and community soup kitchens (De Schutter, 2012; Food Secure Canada, n.d.).

Close to a million Canadians use food banks every month (Food Banks Canada, 2015). Food banks are non-profit organizations that can be publicly or privately managed and are primarily oriented to “collect and distribute food to hunger relief charities such as food pantries” (Dave et al., 2017:28). Food centers are similar institutions, but provide additional services including spaces that encourage users to cook, grow, and share fresh meals, and in a general sense strive to provide more of a sense of shared community than is typically associated with food banks (Community Food Centers Canada, 2018). Most food received by food banks and
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food centers is privately donated from wholesalers, community fundraisers, private businesses, and individual households, and when either contain fresh fruits and vegetables (typically more common in food centers than food banks) it is sometimes purchased at produce auctions.

One way that food centers and food banks could potentially access more affordable fresh produce at little to no cost is by enhancing relations with nearby community gardens, especially since the scale of community gardens has risen in recent years (Copland, 2014; Uytdewilligen, 2020). There have been some fledging efforts to build connections between community gardens, food banks, and food centers in order to help improve the availability of fresh food at these organizations. Although still modest in scale, recent attempts to connect community gardens to food banks and food centers are potentially important for a number of reasons. First and most obvious, they provide a way to help improve the availability of fresh food within food banks and food centers. Second, they also offer the chance for food bank and food center users to engage with food and land in new ways. Engagement in gardening can open a range of benefits to these communities, such as enhancing physical and emotional health and well-being (what is sometimes referred to as horticultural therapy), providing opportunities for people to gain a sense of accomplishment, and improving food literacy and healthy eating.

1.2. Research Motivations, Questions, and Case Study Sites

While I cannot speak to social inequality or food insecurity from the position of ever having had to use a food bank, I have spent a lot of time volunteering in these spaces. This experience has drawn my attention to a range of problems, such as the fact that food banks overwhelmingly contain highly processed packaged food with little to no fresh whole foods. I have also wondered about how individuals who lack access to adequate kitchen facilities and supplies prepare food from food banks. Further, at a wider scale, I have struggled to understand
why so many people have to use food banks in a rich country like Canada. These general questions and concerns motivated me to pursue the lines of research in this thesis, along with my strong sense that there are potentially significant synergies between community gardens, food banks, and food centers.

This thesis is guided by the following core research questions:

1) How do partnerships between food banks, food centers, and community gardens function in practice, and how does this relate to the motivations for establishing them?

2) Do food bank and food center users value the food from community gardens that are made available within food banks and food centers? Why or why not?

3) Do food bank and food center users feel encouraged to participate in the practice of community gardens, or is participation an added burden?

4) Do community garden participants value these spaces and attach meaning to them?

To answer these questions, I undertook research at two sites in southwestern Ontario where food banks, food centers, and community gardens have recently begun to work together: The Women’s Rural Resource Centre (WRRC) in Strathroy, and the Local Community Food Centre (LCFC) in Stratford. In both case study sites, my research consisted of a combination of qualitative interviews with key informants and food center, food bank, and community garden users, complimented by my immersion as a volunteer in all of these spaces and the participant observation this afforded.

The WRRC in Strathroy is funded by a combination of support from federal, provincial, and municipal government funds and contributions from local businesses and individual donors. The center itself provides housing for roughly twelve women, as well as their children, who are
in need of a safe space. Stays typically last for a period between two and five months, and are accompanied by counselling, childcare, life coaching, and a food bank. The food bank is also open to low-income women in the community who are not residents, which is referred to as its ‘food cupboard’ role. In 2014, the WRRC began to operate two community gardens, each approximately 220 square meters in size, located on two nearby parcels of land owned by the Strathroy-Caradoc Police Station and Meridian Lightweight Technologies Inc., which were made available through personal connections between employees at the WRRC, the Police Station, and Meridian (see Figure 1). The two community gardens were explicitly established with the goal of helping to support the physical and emotional needs of residents of the WRRC, in addition to being open to those community members who access the food bank function of the WRRC but do not reside on site. Participants at these gardens include employees and volunteers at the WRRC, the WRRC food cupboard users, and residents of the women’s shelter. The rules at these two community gardens are quite regimented, as volunteers and employees of the WRRC must take the food from the gardens directly to the WRRC food cupboard and the shelter, but when residents of the shelter visit the gardens they are free to harvest the produce for their own use.
For a sense of scale, from the WRRC, the Police Station Community Garden is a 1.3 km (a 16-minute walk), and the Meridian Community Garden is 1.7 km (a 20-minute walk). The town center is shaded yellow around Front Street. Source: Google Maps.

Like the WRRC, the LCFC in Stratford is also funded through a combination of federal, provincial, and municipal government agencies and donations from businesses and individuals in the town, and also recently gained access to an off-site community garden plot, which broke ground in 2017. This space, totaling just under 200 square meters, plus 50 individual 100 square foot plots, is called the Canada 150 Community Garden, and is about a 13-minute walk from the LCFC on municipal land behind the Dufferin Arena (see Figure 2). Unlike the WRRC, the LCFC does not function as a shelter, and is principally oriented around providing four free meals to the public per week, as well as offering several different cooking and gardening classes, and making some food available for individuals to purchase. Because of this meal provision role, like a soup
kitchen, the LCFC has a large cooking and seating capacity, as well as an impressive on-site greenhouse that compliments its gardening training and the new garden plot. A significant difference between the two cases is that the WRRC gardens produce a much greater volume of food than do those of the LCFC, while the LCFC has a larger number of volunteers and participants. Participants at the LCFC garden get first call on its food, and extra supplies are given to the LCFC for the four weekly community meals. Another notable difference is that the LCFC has staff-supported programs geared towards teaching food center users how to garden and prepare the food they have grown themselves, whereas there are no WRRC staff explicitly dedicated to the gardens.

Figure 2: Map of Case Study Sites in Stratford, Ontario.

*For a sense of scale, from the LCFC, the Canada 150 Community Garden is 1.1 km (a 13-minute walk). The city center is roughly 2 km north along Erie Street. Source: Google Maps.*
1.3. Research Objectives

While these gardening initiatives are quite recent and modest in scale, and it is impossible to assess their long-term implications, I nevertheless believe there are important lessons to be found in the process of establishing new interrelations between food banks, food centers, and community gardens, and in how they are functioning in the early stages. One of the starting points for this was to establish why and how these organizations sought to build their gardening programs, and to unpack this I faced a similar constraint in both contexts: neither has any planning or strategic documents that discuss these initiatives. As a result, my assessment of the planning and establishment of the gardens can be read as an aggregated oral history from directors and a small number of other leaders involved in the process, and this provides a foundation for my analysis of how these fledging interrelations are functioning; that is, the personal and institutional dynamics between food banks, food centers, and community gardens.

There have been a number of studies that focus on either the benefits of community gardens or issues surrounding food banks, but I could not find any scholarly research examining collaboration between food banks and community gardens, likely because they are not often connected. The principal example I read about was the experience of The Stop in Toronto (Curtis & Saul, 2013), which is discussed further below. Both the rareness of the interrelation between food banks and food centers and community gardens and the lack of scholarly literature on the subject represents a void that I hope this study addresses, or at least provides a starting point to identifying some important impacts, challenges, and questions. Ultimately, I hope that the findings from this research will help to better understand the potential synergies between food banks, food centers, and community gardens, including insights into some key benefits that can emerge from this interrelation. But I did not want to view these interrelations with rose-coloured
glasses either, and I was also concerned with the barriers that can impede the levels of engagement in the community gardens, the flows of food, and the accessibility to the gardens. This includes shedding some light on the non-economic barriers that users of food centers and food banks face in accessing and preparing fresh food and the institutional or governance challenges in linking food centers to gardens. My hope is that the lessons drawn from these case studies can provide constructive feedback not only to these two institutions (which I intend to do), but also help to inform food bank and food center policies and programs in southwestern Ontario, in particular with respect to the challenges associated with enhancing the active participation in gardening and fostering food literacy and food preparation skills.

1.4. Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 provides an overview of food insecurity in Ontario and Canada and includes a discussion of the concepts of ‘food deserts’ and ‘food swamps’, as well as attention to the populations that are most affected by food insecurity. It also considers some of the major systemic barriers that low-income people face in accessing fresh food, which includes the quality of food available at food centers, the widespread lack of food literacy and food preparation skills, and the ways that time and space constraints can impede cooking from scratch. Attention then turns to the history of community gardens in Ontario and Canada, along with assessments of the health benefits of community gardening discussed in various case studies.

Chapter 3 starts with a discussion of my decision to use a qualitative approach and my identification of the two case study sites, before moving onto a more specific elaboration of the methods I employed in the field. The discussion of field methods begins with an explanation of how I gained access to each site and the nature of my volunteering throughout the course of fieldwork, including how participant observation played out. This is followed by a discussion of
my approach to participant selection through purposive and snowball sampling, and my data collection through in-depth interviews and participant observation. In explaining my methods, I also consider my positionality of being a female researcher and simultaneously a volunteer in food banks, food centers, and community gardens, and reflect on how this impacted the data collection process and how participant observation fortified the interview data, both directly (in asking and framing questions) and indirectly (in building rapport). The chapter concludes with a discussion of how I analyzed the data, including the organization of key themes, the use of NVivo software, and the way that data from the two study sites is integrated.

Chapter 4 compares and contrasts the key findings from the two study sites. This begins with a more detailed picture of the operations of these organizations, including their longer history of food programs and the recent establishment of their gardening initiatives, which expands on the brief introduction in this chapter. The data analysis primarily focuses on: participants’ motivations for joining the gardening programs (drawing heavily on the key informant interviews); the ways that food bank and food center users view the food from the gardens; the ways that some food bank and food center users are engaged in the gardens, or conversely how others explain their lack of engagement; and the way that active garden participants expressed the social, physical, and mental health benefits of this engagement. While there were many hopeful lessons to be learned from these case studies that suggest the value of food banks and food centers building bridges with existing community gardens, the chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the key factors that limit the level of participation in gardening at these sites in general and among food bank and food center users. Among the barriers discussed are: resource limitations to support programming; the importance of physical proximity; and the stigma that is associated with accessing food bank and food center services.
Overarching this section is a sense that while it is important to emphasize the physical and emotional benefits that increasing connections to community gardens can have, it is also important to be attentive to their limitations and how they can exclude some groups of people, as this is necessary to understand potential steps to make them more inclusive and vibrant spaces.

Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings and considers the significance of the research in relation to both possible policy and program outcomes and future research questions. A central conclusion is that while community gardens are not capable of making major improvements in the food security of people who rely on food banks and food centers, they do have the potential to periodically improve access to fresh produce as well as providing more sustained physical and mental health benefits that go beyond the food itself. While many of these benefits might be difficult to quantify, such as invigorated social networks and the therapeutic value of digging one’s hands in the soil, this should not take away from the recognition that food centers and food banks should strive to build linkages wherever possible.
2. Literature Review

2.1. Food Insecurity in Canada and Ontario

Food security is a widely used and often highly ambiguous concept whose meaning has long been debated (Weis, 2020). However, these debates lie beyond the scope of this thesis, and a conventional definition will suffice to help frame the general social and geographical problem that is at the heart of this thesis. Food security is frequently described as a situation in which “all people have physical and economic access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food at all times to meet their own nutritional needs and preferences and have an active and healthy life,” with some definitions indicating the importance of the food being culturally appropriate and “socially acceptable” (Jessri et al., 2014:287). In wealthy countries like Canada that produce large agricultural trade surpluses, food insecurity centers upon social inequality and the financial limitations of low-income people, as well as the geographical issue of unequal distribution of and access to food. According to a recent estimate, food insecurity affects roughly 1 out of 8 households in Canada, based on responses to a question in the 2008 Canadian Household Panel Survey Pilot about whether people had reduced their food intake at some point in the preceding year because of lack of money (Tarasuk & Loopstra, 2019). There is a relation between food insecurity and the use of a food bank, but the relation is not absolute: not all people who are considered to be food insecure regularly use a food bank, while the majority of food bank users in Canada are considered to be moderately or severely food insecure (Tarasuk & Loopstra, 2019). In addition to chronic users, roughly 80,000 people in Canada access a food bank for the first time every month (Food Banks Canada, 2015). In Ontario alone, despite being one of the country’s wealthiest provinces, approximately 400,000 people access a food bank each year, and
this does not include meal programs from soup kitchens, homeless shelters, or food centers (Food Banks Canada, 2015).

Food insecurity in Canada disproportionately affects low-income households, single-parent households (especially those headed by single mothers), indigenous peoples, and recent immigrants (Tarasuk & Loopstra, 2019; Food Banks Canada, 2015; De Schutter, 2012). There is also evidence that food insecurity is highly gendered, with women typically the first to go without food in contexts of scarcity within households, as well as being the ones who are more likely to visit food banks than men (Barreto et al., 2018). The latter point relates to the fact that women tend to have a greater role in the purchasing and preparing of food in most nuclear family structures and disproportionately head single-parent households.

2.2. Systemic Barriers to Accessing Fresh Food

2.2.1. Poverty and Inequality

Food banks were originally established to provide food relief for people facing a temporary crisis, which is why they are often viewed as a proverbial institutional ‘Band-Aid’. In the 1980s, both the number and use of food banks in Canada grew dramatically in response to a period of economic recession combined with growing social inequality and neoliberal policy reforms, that included major cutbacks to social protection programs (Tarasuk & Loopstra, 2019). But rather than ‘Band-Aids’, food banks have become permanent fixtures of society, with many chronic users who rely on food banks every week, or as often as they can access them. In absolute numbers of visits, food bank use in Canada has never been greater than it has been this past decade, influenced by factors such as worsening income inequality, social service cuts, and unaffordable housing in many large cities (Food Banks Canada, 2015; Food Banks Canada, 2019). Food Banks Canada (2019) estimates that approximately 48% of all food bank users in
Canada are single parent families, 57% use provincial social assistance, 17% receive disability income supports, 9% live on a pension, and 5% are homeless. First Nations, Metis, or Inuit (16% of all users) and new refugees and immigrants (10% of all users) also make up a disproportionate share of Canadian food bank users (Food Banks Canada, 2015).

Research has indicated that for many food bank users, time-poverty is an important consideration that impacts the food they choose at food banks (Dave et al., 2017; Ares et al., 2017). As indicated in Chapter 1, food banks frequently tend to have limited supplies of fresh fruits and vegetables, and even if they are available, many users choose processed foods heavy in refined carbohydrates because these sorts of foods can be easier to prepare than fresh vegetables and give a greater sensation of fullness. In other words, food choices made within food banks must also be understood in relation to social inequality. For instance, the fact that some food bank users must work multiple, low-paying jobs and spend more time navigating public transport systems can factor into decisions to choose less healthy food because it is quicker and easier to prepare (Dave et al., 2017). In sum, regular food bank use might help to stave off temporary hunger, but it tends to entail poor nutrition outcomes which compromise another important reason that many find it hard to escape cycles of poverty.

2.2.2. Unequal Access to and Distribution of Food

Narrow definitions of food security focus on the sufficiency of caloric intake, which can obscure the fact that while cheap calories abound in industrial food systems, many people who are consuming plenty of calories are not getting sufficient micro-nutrients (Weis, 2020; Thompson & Amaroso, 2011; Pollan, 2008). It has been increasingly recognized that many low-income people who rely heavily on highly processed non-perishable food items now suffer from micro-nutrient deficiencies, due to the relative inaccessibility of fresh fruits, vegetables, and
whole food products, and that this is a form of malnutrition. Further, diets that are rich in refined carbohydrates and poor in micro-nutrients are a contributing factor in a range of adverse health outcomes, including heightened risks of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes (Lim et al., 2012; Pollan, 2008). Geographical access to food strongly influences dietary choices and health outcomes as well. Research has demonstrated a positive correlation “between geographic access to non-nutritious food sources and obesity rates” (Yang et al., 2018:2). That is, in addition to poverty and the typically lower cost of unhealthy foods relative to healthier options, many low-income people also face geographic barriers to accessing fresh produce as they are forced to navigate retail environments that present extremely limited choices. Such environments have been characterized as ‘food deserts’ and ‘food swamps’, which denote related but different problems.

The United States Department of Agriculture defines food deserts as areas “with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities” (Yang et al., 2018:3). This can either result from an absolute absence of retail options or an environment comprised principally of retailers like convenience stores, dollar stores, gas stations, and food banks (Osoria et al., 2013). Food deserts typically have little to no retailers that are primarily focused on selling food, while retail environments that do contain food possess disproportionate concentrations of processed foods and extremely unhealthy sodas and snack food (Yang et al., 2018). In many cities throughout North America, supermarkets containing healthier food options like fruits and vegetables are disproportionately located on the outskirts of more affluent suburban areas that lower-income individuals may not have the physical or financial ability to regularly shop at (Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2017; Stuckler et al., 2012; Beaulac et al., 2009; Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). Food swamps
are characterized by a “disproportionate access to unhealthy, high-calorie food options” (Osoria et al., 2013:219), such as a large number of fast food restaurants in a small geographic location, as sometimes exists within food deserts. However, food swamps can sometimes exist in contexts where there are also some healthier food options, and the danger is that an overabundance of cheap, unhealthy food choices can crowd out healthier choices (Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2017; Minaker et al., 2016), and there is some indication that food swamps are more of a public health risk in Canada than are food deserts (Health Canada, 2013; Elton, 2018).

The systematic geographic problem of food deserts and food swamps is, for many, compounded by limited transportation options, which constitutes another aspect of the “social inequalities in healthy food accessibility via walking and public transportation” (Yang et al., 2018:5). Many low-income people and food bank users do not have access to a vehicle to drive to the outskirts of a suburban area and grocery shop, and even when they do, these environments can be prohibitive in terms of cost. Where people must rely on walking or public transit to shop for food, carrying several grocery bags can make venturing far from home very forbidding, especially for the elderly, non-able-bodied people, and those with young children. Because it is often not realistic to imagine that a large-scale supermarket will choose to locate within a food desert, given that concerns about profitability is an obvious reason for their absence from these sorts of urban environments (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008), some have suggested more plausible responses are for city governments and planners to encourage some combination of small-scale alternatives, such as local businesses, farmers’ markets, and community gardens. In other words, in some instances it might be more politically plausible for cities and towns to attempt to build up “local food infrastructure” (Yang et al., 2018:16) in diverse ways rather than hoping for a magic bullet like a large retailer placing economic considerations above social ones.
2.2.3. Food Quality at Food Banks

As indicated earlier, food banks do not typically contain much fresh food. Rather, food bank shelves are often filled with products like: canned soup, meat, beans, and vegetables; dry pasta; peanut butter and jam; and jarred baby food (Wetherill et al., 2019; Dave et al., 2017; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013). In addition to a shortage of perishable foods, food banks rarely possess any refrigerated fruits or vegetables. The preponderance of highly processed foods in food banks means that users face constrained choices of options with high levels of refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, sodium, and sugar, and low levels of essential vitamins and minerals (Wetherill et al., 2018; Dave et al., 2017; Jessri et al., 2014). Despite the fact that it is now well-established that the dietary patterns associated with these sorts of food choices tend to increase risks of a number of chronic diseases, this dietary-epidemiological evidence has as yet made little impact on the character of food bank provisions, as “the emphasis of many food banks and food pantries is on quantity of pounds distributed, rather than quality of food” (Martin et al., 2019:553). As Campbell et al. (2013:262) argue, these tendencies raise broader philosophical questions, as “there are ethical concerns about providing foods to alleviate hunger that may unwittingly increase the risk of obesity and chronic disease among low income families.”

Part of these problems stem from the nature of food bank donors. Because food banks rely on donations rather than publicly mandated provisions, they often have little influence on what supplies come in and in turn what they can make available. Yet in spite of this, Martin et al. (2019) suggest that food bank directors bear some responsibility to go beyond the conventional emphasis on the quantity of food supplies and work to improve the diversity and quality of foods available to users. This ability would be further enhanced if there were stronger guidance and
mandates for food banks from federal and provincial governments as to what specifically constitutes nutritious or healthy food, as food bank directors presently do not have much support or leverage with respect to donors in this regard (Campbell et al., 2013; Philip et al., 2018). Another limitation that has been noted is that most food bank employees and volunteers have little to no education or training regarding nutrition guidelines, which means that food banks could benefit from more active participation and input from dietitians and public health officials (Jessri et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2019). Practically, such involvement could enhance the ability of food banks to offer guidance on subjects such as healthy food choices and recipes, and even offering cooking classes, but again the key starting point for this is enhanced supplies of healthier options.

2.2.4. Food Illiteracy

Another significant barrier to improving healthier food consumption relates to the “diminishing understanding and skills set around food and its use” (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014:50), something that has been increasingly described in terms of the growing ‘food illiteracy’ in modern, increasingly urbanized societies (Begley et al., 2019; Fernadez et al., 2019; Slater, 2017). Food illiteracy is especially problematic when it prevails among dietary gatekeepers, meaning those household members who control the buying and preparing of food and access food banks. Begley et al. (2019:1) define food literacy as “the practical food knowledge and skills encompassing the planning, management, selection, preparation and eating food,” and stress that it is an important aspect of “the ability of a person to feed themselves (and others) in a nutrition promoting way.” Food literacy also includes a range of other issues, such as understanding where one’s food comes from and how to interpret nutrition guidelines, the ability to manage grocery money, meal preparation, and cooking time, and knowledge about how to
select, properly store, and cook nutritious foods (Thomas et al., 2019; Slater, 2017; Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014).

Although there is not necessarily a direct link between poverty, food insecurity, and food illiteracy, it is possible that a high level of food literacy can help people to better navigate the challenges of food insecurity in contexts of poverty and highly constrained food budgets. For instance, people who have a high level of food literacy would be more inclined to budget for nutritious food and prioritize fresh over convenience foods in meal planning, and purchase in-season produce in bulk to freeze or preserve in other ways. As Wijayratne et al. (2018:2462) put it, “improved food literacy can reduce the impact of barriers such as lack of time, low motivation to eat healthy meals, managing competing taste preferences of family members, the convenience of fast foods, [and] lack of knowledge on what constitutes healthy meals.” Enhancing the knowledge and skills of dietary gatekeepers to prepare healthier meals for their households, along with their general confidence in their cooking abilities, can also give a sense of empowerment (Wijayratne et al., 2018; Slater, 2017). In light of these advantages, it is conceivable that some sort of food literacy programs within food banks might help to encourage users to make healthy choices, including choosing and preparing food from community gardens.

2.3. Health Benefits of Community Gardens

2.3.1. The Connection Between Community Gardens and Food Banks

Community gardens are sections of land that are gardened individually or collectively “for the specific purpose of growing fruits, vegetables and/or herbs,” typically though not necessarily “for self-consumption,” and they are usually established on public lands in urban areas for a combination of recreational and health benefits that result from the mixture of exercise, aesthetics, fresh air, socialization, and fresh food itself (Egli et al., 2016:348). Most
often they include individual plots inside of a larger shared space, although occasionally there are large collective gardens or a grouping of individual and shared plots (Drake & Lawson, 2015). Community gardens in Canada are typically run by some combination of non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, municipal governments, and certain social services, such as homeless shelters and low-income housing projects. Community gardens have often been instigated by members of a neighborhood “to turn a vacant or abandoned city property into a productive green space” (Drake & Lawson, 2015:243), which can involve the help of local governments and non-governmental organizations to assist in the leasing of land and funding of the gardens.

There are some indications that community gardens have the potential to supplement the dearth of healthy food options at food banks. A pioneering case of this occurred with The Stop in Toronto, which was one of the original food banks in Canada, opening in the early 1980s (The Stop, n.d.). In the late 1990s and 2000s, The Stop began to expand from a conventional food bank into a much broader ‘community hub’ that sought to enhance the availability of healthy food as well as improving users’ food skills and social connectivity, with the goal to use “the power of this good food to transform lives” (Curtis & Saul, 2013:23). Embedded in this was a critique of how food banks had become a fixture of modern societies, chronically providing emergency handouts of low-quality food to the poor, in a way that served to mask over the enduring problems of hunger and food insecurity. The transformation of The Stop involved the development of a series of interconnected programs, including a weekly farmer’s market, drop-in community meals, food education classes for children and pregnant women, an onsite greenhouse, a food bank, and community gardens (Curtis & Saul, 2013). The community gardens at The Stop were designed with the objective of being respectful and responsive to the
diverse cultures engaged in the programs, which included devoting different plots to meet a range of cultural needs, as well as having different cultural groups use food from the gardens to cook for others on a rotating basis. Other aspects of the community gardening program at The Stop include programming for both children and seniors, gardening tutorial classes, and harvest festivals for the gardeners to share “the fruits of their labours” (Curtis & Saul, 2013:17).

The success of The Stop in transforming from a food bank to a community food hub helped to inspire the growth of Community Food Centers in Canada (CFC Canada, n.d.), which the LCFC is affiliated with. It also helped to pioneer the relationship between food banks and food centers and community gardens, as one means to improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables for users, and therefore can be seen as one spark for the cases in Southwestern Ontario explored in this thesis.

2.3.2. Physical Health Benefits

Given the scale of food insecurity and the factors that bear on it, and the comparatively modest volumes of food generated by community gardens, it is not realistic to expect that community gardens can have a large impact on the overall food security of low-income households. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that gardening programs connected to food banks and food centers do have the potential to bring some positive health benefits. At the most direct level, gardens can increase the volume of fresh produce and the range of healthy food options at food banks and food centers. But the potential health benefits extend far beyond the shelves of food banks and food centers, and another significant possibility lies in the potential to simultaneously affect behaviours and food choices and increase physical activity. This is clearly indicated by the growing literature on positive health outcomes associated with community gardening. For instance, in a case study located in Flint, Michigan, Al-Delaimy and Webb
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(2017:253) found that 34% of households that participated in community gardening “consumed fruit and vegetables at least five times a day,” compared to 17% of households of similar socio-economic backgrounds that were not engaged in community gardening. In a study in South Australia, community gardeners reported that physical health benefits were a central motivation in becoming active in a garden, which they mostly correlated to improved nutrition and access to fresh food (Pollard et al., 2018). A study of highly multicultural community gardens in Toronto, Ontario discovered that one of the biggest reasons participants (including many recent immigrants) valued these spaces was that they enabled them to augment their access to culturally appropriate food, which were sometimes unavailable or unaffordable in grocery stores (Wakefield et al., 2017). Similarly, in a case study on community gardening in Victoria, Australia, Sanchez and Liampittong (2017) also found that gardeners reported consuming more fruits and vegetables as a result of this activity, as well as sometimes consuming varieties of fruits and vegetables that were not consistently available at grocery stores. The latter two cases speak to the fact that community gardens can be spaces of teaching and learning, including things such as new cultivation practices and new ways of cooking, that serve to improve participants’ food literacy (Grubb & Vogl, 2019; London Community Resource Center, n.d.).

In addition to the increased access to fruit and vegetables itself, community gardens also have the potential to improve health outcomes among participants by encouraging people to learn about and reflect on the importance of healthy food, as well as the regular exercise and physical engagement with the soil, sun, and elements that come with gardening (Al-Delaimy & Webb, 2017). In the Flint study mentioned above, Al-Delaimy and Webb (2017) also found evidence that participation in community gardening increased the physical activity levels of individuals relative to what they were doing before they got involved in gardening, and that this
group tended to identify improvements in their health which they frequently linked to the exercise from gardening. They also suggest this could even have an impact on reducing childhood obesity. In a case study based in a low-income community in Melbourne, Australia, Mmako et al. (2019) found that a group of community gardeners tended to have significantly healthier body mass indexes (a trend that correlates with reduced rates of noncommunicable diseases) relative to their non-gardening peers. Another case study where community gardens were demonstrated to have improved the physical health of participants was in McLean County, Illinois. There, the establishment of gardens was motivated by the twin goals of increasing physical activity and fresh food intake, in response to high rates of noncommunicable diseases and obesity, and successful outcomes led other organizations to pursue similar initiatives (Lanier et al., 2015). Some research has indicated that the physical health benefits of community gardening are especially significant for seniors, as many seniors perceive it as a moderate level of activity that can contribute to either maintaining or improving their current fitness levels (Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017).

2.3.3. Mental Health Benefits

Perhaps the greatest way that community gardens can impact health outcomes relates to improved mental health, as many researchers have stressed that community gardens are spaces that are valued by participants for far more than just the food and the physical activity of gardening. As Marsh et al. (2018:338) put it, well-organized community gardens can offer a setting “to bring people together in a safe community space; grow healthy fresh food for people; improve access to and uptake of healthy eating; and provide training and employment opportunities.” For instance, in a case study in Tasmania, Australia, researchers found that roughly one-third of the community gardeners surveyed identified the value of their community
garden as a place for healing and therapy (Marsh et al., 2018). They also indicated that community gardens can be a safe space especially for people dealing with a range of mental health issues and illnesses, such as: chronic anxiety; schizophrenia; post-traumatic stress disorder; and dementia, and can help individuals find purpose, fulfilment, solace, and comfort, even if these spaces are more valued for sitting, socializing, and taking in the sun than they are for gardening (Marsh et al., 2018). In short, community gardens might also be seen as a sort of therapeutic landscape, and while these impacts can be especially marked for participants with mental health issues and illnesses, the mental health benefits are not limited to people who are suffering. Community gardeners have indicated that they value these spaces for the tranquility, relaxation, and reflection they afford, with some reporting associations of “love, happiness and contentment” (Pollard et al., 2018:13). It has also been suggested that community gardening might have the potential to improve attention and memory among children and cognitive function among the elderly (Al-Delaimy & Webb, 2017). For people who wrestle with boredom and depression, gardening can provide opportunities to find structure and a feeling of purpose and accomplishment in everyday life. This can be especially important for retirees who lack the day-to-day sense of accomplishment that work can provide, as the garden can provide some “motivation to get up at the beginning of the week and go to the garden to spend time with their fellow gardeners” (Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017:277).

Community gardens can also help to create healthier communities by bringing people together, strengthening neighborhoods, building social capital, and creating community pride (Lanier et al., 2015; Firth et al., 2011; Wakefield et al., 2007). Sanchez and Liamputtong (2017:276) also found that community gardens have the potential to draw together people from “a wide range of backgrounds and personalities,” increase participants’ “sense of belonging and
connection to the local community,” and thereby reduce the chance of developing conditions like depression and anxiety (Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017:276). This includes helping to establish bonds of trust with other gardeners and community members and creating new social networks, which in turn encourages participants to continue going to their garden regularly. Some have argued that the creation of new friendships and the social support networks generated in community gardens can be especially important for recent immigrants and refugees, with the potential to “positively influence their quality of life by promoting trust, reciprocity and a sense of belonging” (Mmako et al., 2019:351; see also Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017; Wakefield et al., 2007). Gardens can also offer a chance to share food and ideas across cultures, which is another way that they can help recent immigrants and refugees feel less isolated in their new communities (Wakefield et al., 2007). In a survey of 20 community gardens in upstate New York, Armstrong (2000) found that these spaces can help to fortify social networks and cohesion, with participants from low-income and minority neighborhoods reporting that the sense of community was as important to them as was the improved access to fresh food.

2.4. Conclusion

Food insecurity is a widespread problem for many Canadians, with access to fresh food constrained by many socioeconomic factors such as income, the uneven distribution of food retailers, and the typically poor quality of food at food banks, while the ability to navigate these challenges is complicated by widespread food illiteracy. Community gardens have the potential to supplement some of the lack of fresh food on shelves at food banks, as well as potentially encouraging users to consume more fresh food through the act of gardening. Community gardens can also improve participants’ physical health through exercise and their mental health through the sense of community they can foster, as well as by promoting a sense of accomplishment and
self-sufficiency. There is a large amount of research that indicates their beneficial health impacts reach far beyond their potential to increase the consumption of fresh and nutritious food.

Considering the problems of uneven access to healthy food together with the potential benefits from community gardens was at the heart of my desire to pursue this research, there are strong reasons to believe that community gardens can enhance the health of individuals who rely on food banks and food centers, and there is limited research exploring these connections.

In the next chapter, I will explain my decision to use a qualitative case study approach and the methods I employed. This discussion includes an explanation of how I gained access to each case study site, the volunteer roles I took on at the organizations, my process of participant recruitment, how my positionality affected data collection, and my approach to data analysis.
3. Research Methods

3.1. A Qualitative Approach

My central motivation in pursuing this research was to understand how fledging relationships between community gardens, food banks, and food centers in Southwestern Ontario were conceptualized, how they function in practice, and whether increasing access to either the community gardens or the food they generate matters for food bank and food center users. As indicated in Chapter 1, an important basis for assessing both the opportunities and challenges was to examine the initial motivations for building these links, which required me to pursue an oral history account as there were no written plans or recorded minutes of meetings. Once this was established, my central focus was to understand how food bank and food center users perceive a range of related subjects, including how they view community gardens, how they make their food choices, whether they are becoming more involved in community gardening programs or not, and (for those who took an active part in the garden) if they believe that being involved in community gardening impacts their physical, mental, or social health.

I determined that a qualitative approach was best suited to answer my research questions because my principal concern was to examine the views, experiences, and motivations behind the community gardening initiatives at the two study sites, and “qualitative methods, such as interviews, are believed to provide a ‘deeper’ understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods, such as questionnaires” (Gill et al., 2008:292). They also allow greater flexibility for unexpected ideas and new questions to emerge. Semi-structured interviews provided the primary source of data for this thesis, complimented by extensive participant observation at both sites. In weighing different interview formats, I determined that structured interviews would provide too little room for variation or elaboration by participants,
and therefore could not access the perceptual questions I was seeking to answer (Longhurst, 2003). On the other hand, I feared that unstructured interviews could progress in haphazard ways, depending on the answers given by participants, and could too easily wander from my research questions and therefore not provide a similar enough basis for comparing and contrasting insights. I chose to use a semi-structured interview guide because it allowed me to focus the interviews around a consistent range of subjects with every participant, while at the same time allowing them flexibility to frame the issues as much as possible in their own terms, to explore responses in greater detail and expand on information that they feel is important, including with ideas that I may not have previously considered (Longhurst, 2003). Another reason for selecting semi-structured interviews was that they are seen to be appropriate when little is known about the study topic and when sensitive topics are being investigated (Gill et al., 2008), both of which were true in my case, because there is little known about the relations between community gardens, food banks, and food centers, and because interviews touched on a range of issues facing socially marginalized people. In designing my semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A for interview guide with key informants and Appendix B for interview guide with food bank and food center users and community gardeners), my goal was to use mostly open-ended questions, starting with simpler issues and moving into more difficult subjects as the conversation unfolded, as well as probing for more explanation throughout the conversation, depending on participants’ responses. My process of qualitative interviewing was enhanced by participant observation in the course of regularly volunteering at both case study sites. It is well-established that qualitative research can be strengthened by the collection of several different forms of data (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Baxter & Eyles, 1997), and participant observation allowed me to better understand many of the answers participants gave, enhanced by
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my ability to follow-up with effective probes, and improved the rapport I had with some participants. It also aided in my understanding of the day-to-day activities at each study site and helped me to establish and maintain trust with participants.

3.2. The Value of Case Studies

I chose to conduct my research at two case study sites so that I could compare and contrast the ideas and experiences in two different but similar non-profit organizations that have targeted community gardening as a means to improve the provision of healthy food to different sorts of low-income communities. The selection of cases in qualitative research typically involves groups like communities or institutions that have some important aspects in common, which was the case with this research, though sometimes cases are selected for marked differences (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Before I began my fieldwork, I was confident that I would be able to interview several key informants at both sites which, in addition to relative proximity, was an advantage with my site selection. Key informants are individuals who have a particular vantage that is distinctive from other participants, with respect to things like specialized expertise of employment within the organization under study, that allows them to provide specific information in relation to the research questions (Gilchrist, 1999). In my cases, the key informants were the employees at the WRRC and the LCFC, while the general participants were drawn from people who used the food services and/or participated in the community gardens.

A common goal of qualitative case study research is to develop new knowledge about “organizational, community, group, or other types of social processes” and outcomes (Bickman & Rog, 2009:5). The advantage of using more than one case can result from very different outcomes: either where the cases produce very similar or very different results, or there are both
some notable similarities and differences (the latter proved to be the case in my research). A common critique of qualitative research is that it lacks rigor and generalizability due to its reliance on non-representative samples and often small sample sizes, and the use of more than one case study can provide responses that add confidence to the findings (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; McAleese & Kilty, 2019; Huberman & Miles, 1994). According to McAleese and Kilty (2019:836), the ‘layering’ of case studies can have a similar effect “to the replication that quantitative researchers aim for in their work, only instead of validating the research tool qualitative researchers are looking to validate the narrative” of the analysis, including various key themes and arguments, and this is what I hope to have achieved in my research.

3.3. Gaining Access and Volunteer Engagement at the Study Sites

For three months, I spent an average of four days each week at both the food bank of the WRRC and the food center of the LCFC and the associated community gardens. The goal of participant observation is to establish rapport, gain trusting relationships with participants, and “find ways to fit in the organization that do not disturb the setting” (Bogdewic, 1999:57). Participant observation involves spending a prolonged amount of time in the field to collect data and field notes and interact with participants in meaningful but also casual ways, that do not distract from the normal routine of the spaces and can allow for casual conversations about subjects related to the research (Kuzel, 1999; Evans, 2012). As many qualitative researchers have indicated, volunteerism and participant observation can help in nurturing relationships with participants and enable outreach with possible participants (Kuzel, 1999; Evans, 2012), and I found this was very true of my experience. Spending time with participants in a consistent way helped me to gain their trust and made me feel less like an ‘outsider’ and more comfortable asking for interviews. It also gave me more confidence in the interview process, in framing
questions, interpreting responses, and following up with further probes, as well as enabling me to better understand the everyday rhythms of the food banks, food centers, and community gardens along with their interpersonal dynamics.

It was easy for me to gain access to the WRRC because I had already worked there for 10 weeks in the summer of 2018, which involved overseeing the community gardens and facilitating a bi-weekly gardening group with residents from the shelter, organizing the food cupboard, building an in-shelter hydroponic vegetable tower, preparing the shelter’s weekly grocery list, and cooking with women in the shelter. My previous work experience had established good working relationships with the WRRC’s directors, who were all supportive of my project, open to being interviewed, and allowed me to hang announcements about my research at the front desk of the WRRC and in the food cupboard. Many food cupboard users, shelter residents, and community gardeners recognized me from the previous summer, and this further helped my recruitment of participants.

At the onset of my research at the WRRC in 2019, I completed a mandatory volunteer orientation, which included some education about violence against women and involved my signing of a confidentiality form. I had several different volunteer tasks that focused on the food cupboard every Wednesday and alternating between one of the two community gardens every Thursday. In the food cupboard, my formal tasks included organizing donations, updating the food inventory, and inputting data on weekly use, added to which were a range of informal interactions, such as chatting with food cupboard users about inventory and recipes. My volunteering with the two community gardens involved driving women from the shelter to the gardens, getting my hands dirty weeding, watering, and harvesting vegetables, and cleaning and organizing them into proportioned bags for the food cupboard. I also spent a day selling excess
produce at the Masonville Mall Farmer’s Market in London, Ontario to help raise money that would be used for general supplies to support the WRRC’s gardening program.

Gaining access to volunteering and conducting research at the LCFC was only slightly more difficult than it was at the WRRC, as I did not have a previous relationship there. After an email and a meeting with the volunteer director, it was arranged that I could volunteer with the Tuesday morning community garden drop-in program, and I subsequently completed an online orientation and training module. At the first Tuesday morning drop-in program, I was introduced to two other directors, who in turn led me to the community gardeners as well as other food programming directors at the LCFC. One of the gardening program directors also attached my study announcement into a newsletter which was distributed to anyone who accesses the LCFC’s services.

At the LCFC, I attended four Monday community meals and went to the ‘Shared Soil Collective Garden’ drop-in gardening program every Tuesday. At the Monday meals, I simply chatted with community meal users and shared a meal. In the garden on Tuesdays I also got my hands dirty helping with weeding, watering, planting, rototilling, and harvesting vegetables, which were either taken home by the gardeners or sent back to the LCFC for use in one of the community meals. I also attended a webinar titled ‘Demystifying Food Politics: News from the Hill on Poverty and Food Policy’, which provided helpful broader insights into how Food Centers across Canada have responded to Canada’s new food guide.

3.4. Identifying and Selecting Participants

From June to August of 2019, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews that were focused on examining the motivations to build the links between community garden, food bank, and food center programs and how these efforts were playing out. I interviewed a total of 9 key informants
(directors and managers), and 16 adults who either used the WRRC food cupboard and the LCFC or participated in the associated community gardens, or both. At the WRRC, I conducted 12 interviews in total, with two garden coordinators, three front line staff at the women’s shelter, four community gardeners, and three food cupboard users. Of the seven food bank users and community gardeners, all were female (with ages ranging from 18 to 57, with the average age being 43). Five were Canadian, one of whom was Indigenous, while one was a recent immigrant, and another was a refugee. At the LCFC, I conducted 13 interviews in total, with four staff members, eight community gardeners, and one community meal users. Of the community gardeners and community meal users I interviewed from the LCFC, there were five males and four females (ranging in age from 31 to 65, with an average age of 50). The majority (eight out of nine) of these participants were from Canada, one of whom was Indigenous, and one was an immigrant. In both cases, I did not collect any demographic data from directors and staff, only job descriptions, as I felt the demographic data of the food bank users and community gardeners was more pertinent to my understanding of the relationship to the food banks, food centers, and gardens.

I recruited participants through a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. I began my set of interviews with directors, which not only helped me to better understand the organizations and the aims of the gardening programs, but also assisted in my identification of participants, as they took an active role facilitating conversations about the study with community gardeners, food bank, and food center users. In addition to this help, I also tried to purposively sample participants in order to gather information from a diverse range of perspectives. I also pursued a process of triangulation, which entails “both the use of multiple data sources, for example, multiple informants, and of multiple methods, such as participant
observation and information interviewing” (Kuzel, 1999:87; see also Longhurst, 2003), principally through the participant observation and associated research journaling that accompanied my volunteering, and this greatly enhanced my confidence in the validity of the interview data. My keeping of a detailed research journal about my day-to-day activities, experiences, and casual conversations also enhanced my reflexivity and insights from participant observation (Evans, 2012).

I conducted my interviews in the community gardens, the WRRC shelter, and the LCFC dining room. Although I did not provide any monetary incentive to participate, in the spirit of the study I did give a small gift of gardening supplies to each participant to show my appreciation for their time. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and two hours, a wide variation that reflects the fact that I tried to allow participants to express their concerns, lived experiences and views about food and the community gardening initiatives they were involved in as much depth as they were willing to and at whatever pace they wanted to proceed.

At the beginning of each interview, I read the Letter of Information and asked for written consent from participants, and I assured them of confidentiality and the right to withdraw their participation at any point if they were uncomfortable for any reason (none did) (see Appendix C for the Letter of Information form and interview consent form and Appendix D for ethics approval). Although I did not perceive any significant risks to participants in the study, I did recognize that some participants may have felt a degree of distress in discussing personal stories and difficulties (on the other hand, I would also like to think that it might also have been cathartic for some to have a sympathetic ear listening to them explain ideas, problems, and concerns). At the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants if they were aware of other people who may be interested in participating in the study and would be good to speak about the
issues we covered, after which I provided my business card for potential participants to contact me.

Most interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants to enhance the accuracy of the data provided, and in these cases I transcribed the data from the interviews verbatim, using a denaturalized form of transcription that leaves out breaks in the conversation and other non-verbal aspects of the conversation (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). However, a few participants did not wish to be audio-recorded, which I resolved by taking as detailed notes as I could during the interview and subsequently checking to make sure I did not miss anything important. At the end of the interviews, I sometimes felt that the small tokens I gave to participants were not sufficient given how generous they were with their time and their ideas, but I took some consolation in my hope that the research could help to inform improvements in the practices and policies surrounding the WRRC’s and the LCFC’s gardening programs.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

At the outset of my fieldwork I had hoped to complete 40 interviews as well as using focus groups. Although I came up short of these targets, I was nevertheless pleased with the quality of the data generated in the 25 in-depth interviews. My biggest disappointment was that logistical challenges made me abandon focus groups, as I found organizing individual interviews was challenging in itself, and it was implausible to coordinate multiple schedules given the inconsistent rhythms of these spaces, the busy nature of individual lives, and the fact that I could not easily identify coherent groups. Many potential participants simply declined an interview if I had not had the opportunity to get to know them at the garden or at the food cupboard and the community meals, and I had to reschedule a number of appointments for various reasons.
Although volunteering did help with recruitment and building rapport, as noted earlier, I was still always aware that my identity as a white, middle-class, university student made me an outsider in these communities (although middle-class white people comprised the majority of the key informants). This outsider status was most acute when interview invitations were declined, and sometimes rejections made me feel more self-conscious to ask potential participants for an interview, which was compounded by my strong desire to be respectful of people’s space and quiet time in the garden or visiting the food centers.

My experience in the field was also influenced by my positionality as a female researcher and I am conscious of the enduring risks associated with gender-based violence. In qualitative research, the fact that the researcher is the ‘active instrument’ implies that personal characteristics have some degree of influence upon the interview, and that it is essential to be reflexive throughout the fieldwork process, as “power relations and the presentation of self in the interview are crucial determinants. Age, gender, ethnicity and other outward appearances can potentially affect how respondents react in the interview” (Baxter & Eyles, 1997:513-514). This is often understood with respect to the relatively greater social power of the researcher vis-à-vis participants, but part of my research experience was affected by safety concerns in the field, which limited my flexibility to a degree. I tried to prepare for this as much as possible, including creating a safety plan at the outset of my fieldwork, having someone know where I was at all times, and never being alone with participants, but in spite of this I still found myself underprepared for some of the experiences I encountered with male participants and I never felt safe being in either of the community gardens alone.

As Ross (2015:180-182) argues, the assumption that the archetypal researcher is “detached and neutral is steeped in white, middle-class, and male privilege,” and this leads to a
widespread neglect for both how the gendered risks of fieldwork “can fundamentally affect the movement, data collection, positioning, and identities of women in the field,” and for how “female researchers can put themselves in vulnerable positions in which they must constantly assess the balance between personal safety and rich data collection.” As my research unfolded, I found it nearly impossible to interact with participants in a completely neutral way, and felt like I had to prioritize politeness over neutrality and assertiveness in order to further gain or retain the trust of participants. I also acted in more defensive ways around male participants, such as dressing conservatively, and I had to end two interviews early when I felt uncomfortable. But these problems were not the reason why I stopped short of my initial target of 40 interviews. By the end of August, I was having a hard time recruiting additional participants, and felt like I had spoken with people coming to the food centers and the gardens from a range of vantages. Although I only interviewed one community meal user at the LCFC, this group was less significant than the gardeners because the garden food is incorporated in the mealtime and it is not a matter of choice. Also, almost all of the community gardeners at the LCFC were already involved with a cooking class, the low-cost market, or attended at least one of the weekly community meals.

I do not believe that the credibility of this study is undermined by the small sample size, because by the end of the summer I had a strong sense of thematic saturation with respect to the major subjects I went in seeking to explore, as well as some that related to unexpected issues that emerged in the course of the research, as a similar array of key issues recurred from interview to interview. My sense of thematic saturation, and that I was not missing any major issue or perspective, was further strengthened by the process of participant observation, which was a key
part of this study and contributed greatly to my in-depth understanding of the daily operations of these spaces.

After each volunteer shift, I took detailed notes of my observations and insights, along with aspects of the context, including: the tasks I completed in the garden (on those days I was working there); who I spoke with in the gardens, food banks, or community meals; an estimate of how many people visited each space; what kind of food was being offered at the food banks or community meals; and the common conversation topics I listened in on that day. I organized my fieldnotes by case study site and each week I typed and inputted the data into NVivo software, which later helped me organize it according to the key themes I identified. I also stayed on top of my interview transcriptions each week and inputted them into NVivo software, which helped me to see both commonalities and divergences and begin to identify themes as I went along prior to starting my data analysis.

Data analysis involves “attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, [and] imposing order” (Patton, 1990:423). At the heart of coding qualitative data is the identification of significant categories and patterns, and in the process of coding it is important to remember that “codes do not stand alone but are part of a web of interconnected themes and categories” (Cope, 2003:448). I used open coding, which involves marking important themes and creating broad codes in the course of assessing data, while retaining the flexibility to change and augment codes as the data is further scrutinized (Cope, 2003). My process of coding used both etic (i.e. established from the literature and drawing on the interview guide) and emic (i.e. emergent from the data) categories, which generated codes such as: fresh produce, community, empowerment, mental health, exercise, and food access. I took a cross-case
approach, as the nature of the data was such that it made sense to use the same categories to code all of the interviews (Patton, 1990).

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter explained why I took a qualitative approach for this research and my desire to allow participants to share their stories and views through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It also explored the choice of case study sites, including the advantages I had in getting started, the nature of my volunteering and participant observation, and some of the challenges that emerged in the course of my fieldwork. In the next chapter, attention turns to comparing and contrasting the main findings from the two case studies. Key issues explored in Chapter 4 include the motivations behind establishing the community gardening programs, how the food from the gardens is viewed by food bank and food center users and whether or not this impacts their engagement in the gardens, how participants perceive the health impacts of community gardening, and the challenges these programs face moving forwards.
4. Analysis

4.1. Introduction

This chapter begins with a more detailed description of each case study site and the programming they offer. Next, drawing upon insights from key informants at the WRRC and LCFC, users of their food services, and people who participate in the affiliated community gardens, I outline some of the motivations for why participants originally joined the community gardens, how the food from the community gardens is viewed by both people who regularly come to these institutions for food and to garden (groups that sometimes overlap), and why some community gardeners are more involved than others. Attention then turns to some of the main health benefits of community gardens as perceived by participants, which includes social, mental, and physical health benefits. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the main barriers to the future growth of these community gardens, physically and in terms of the scale of participation, from both institutional and individual perspectives.

4.2. The Objectives and Operations of the WRRC Community Gardens

The WRRC offers many services for women in the community who are in crisis. Its core services include: emergency housing; a 24/7 confidential crisis line; risk assessment and safety planning for women fleeing an abusive relationship; individual and group counselling; art therapy; child services such as childcare, play therapy, and counselling; and a food provision role referred to as the food cupboard, which also contains hygiene items. One key informant described the food cupboard as a small, “friendly food bank” that was initially intended as a sort of ‘Band Aid’ fix, with the recognition that acute food insecurity was an issue that ultimately has some bearing on problems associated with gender-based violence. Although this service is funded out of the WRRC’s core operating funds, and is intended for women living in the
community struggling to cope with gender-based violence, it has also has become very popular for some low-income community members beyond just the core population of women facing abusive relationships that the WRRC serves. Community members who are deemed eligible to use the food cupboard by the WRRC, based on a loose criterion of need, can access up to two bags of food per week. One front-line staff member estimated that on average, approximately 100 people access the food cupboard per month, with heightened use typically when there is a holiday or long weekend coming up, and sometimes families with as many as 10 people coming in for food. In addition to the food on the shelves, the WRRC also provides grocery cards to some regular users, which are also funded out of the operation budget. According to one key informant, grocery cards are not only a response to times when supplies are low, but are also intended to encourage less reliance on the food cupboard every week, reflecting the fact that demand for the food cupboard has outgrown the initial ‘Band Aid’ intention of the service and has become a primary source of food for some of its regular users. In such cases where WRRC staff recognize that a dependence on the food cupboard has been established, these individuals will be directed to WRRC counsellors who provide advice about other social services available as well as such things as household food budgeting.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the WRRC began to operate two community gardens in 2014. According to one key informant, the core motivation in establishing these gardens was to make some contribution to the evident problem of food insecurity facing some members of the Strathroy community, by “bring[ing] fresh food into […] the food cupboard, even into the [early] winter,” as well has having a broader objective about “educat[ing] women to grow food” and for them to simply “have a garden to relax in.” Both of the garden sites were established through personal connections between staff at the WRRC and key individuals at Meridian Lightweight
Technologies (an automotive parts manufacturer) and the station of the Middlesex Detachment of Ontario Provincial Police (OPP). At Meridian, one of the volunteers at the WRRC had a relationship with a key executive, who welcomed the idea of making use of the large, empty plot of land next to the factory and set about securing permission from the company’s directors. The development of the Police Station garden emerged from the fact that the WRRC has long had a good working relationship with the OPP officers in Strathroy, and staff from the police station offered the WRRC their large, otherwise empty backyard, with the only condition being that all volunteers check-in at the police station first before starting to garden.

Both garden sites are approximately 220 square metres. The garden near the Meridian factory is a communal plot that is surrounded by a small forest, enclosed with a wooden and wire fence to deter animals and vandals. There is an outhouse for visitors and a large oak tree next to the garden that offers shade, as well as lawn chairs intended for women from the WRRC to come and spend quiet time in the garden to read, colour, paint, or simply sit and chat, but there is no shed for gardening tools so volunteers must bring their own. Two planter boxes are located on the outside of the garden fence that grow pumpkins and watermelons, and sunflowers surround the garden to attract pollinators and marigolds to deter pests. In 2019, the garden contained roughly 75 rows of vegetables, including carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, squashes, zucchinis, spinach, lettuce, beans, radishes, and several different varieties of herbs. In general, the atmosphere is tranquil and comforting.

In 2017, the WRRC partnered with the township’s horticultural technicians, a relationship that improved the general maintenance of the garden daily through such things as supplying some fertilizer (but no pesticides) and delivering produce to the WRRC when extra help is needed during busy harvesting periods. Although the garden is situated on property that is
owned by a business, which might seem like a source of uncertainty from year-to-year, key informants at the WRRC indicated that they have a written contract with Meridian so that the garden can continue indefinitely. Meridian also freely services the garden’s water, which is accessed through a garden hose and two standing sprinklers that activate every morning. One of the garden’s primary volunteers explained that two local garden centers donate key supplies for both of the WRRC gardens, such as seeds, seedlings, tomato cages, and mulch.

The Police Station garden is less secluded than the Meridian garden, as it is situated in an open field and is not enclosed. In 2019, there were 11 raised beds, surrounded by a deep layer of mulch to deter the thick grasses from growing, and a large 15 by 15-metre communal plot with about 20 rows of vegetables in it. The main crops were tomatoes, beans, zucchinis, cucumbers, strawberries, peppers, onions, potatoes, and squashes. There are no comfortable shaded areas for

Figure 3: The Meridian garden showing the layout of the communal plot. Photo taken by author.

Figure 4: Vegetable rows inside the Meridian garden plot. Photo taken by author.
volunteers and visitors to sit and relax, other than in the mulch or grass. In general, there is a much less tranquil and relaxing atmosphere than that of the Meridian garden, compounded further by the fact that there is a YMCA adjacent to the OPP Station that creates a lot of noise when the children’s day camp is in session. As with the Meridian garden, the Police Station garden benefits from free water (drawn from a hose that is connected to a pumphouse behind the OPP Station) and there is no shed, so volunteers must bring their own tools to the site. Unlike the Meridian garden, the police station garden does not benefit from some support from township’s horticultural technicians, so it requires much more upkeep and labour than the Meridian garden, including manual watering since there is not a sprinkler system.

Figure 5: The raised beds (containing onions, peppers, and tomatoes) at the Police Station garden. Photo taken by author.

Figure 6: The communal plot at the Police Station garden. Photo taken by author.

In the summer of 2019, there was a similar number of regular volunteers at both gardens, about 10, despite the fact that the Police Station garden requires more volunteer labour due to the support that the horticultural technicians give to the Meridian garden. This undoubtedly relates to the considerable aesthetic advantages of the Meridian site, as some participants expressed a
preference for going to this site even if there is less need for things like weeding and watering to make it productive. While the considerable support given by the technicians to the Meridian garden clearly benefits its productivity, it can complicate the volunteer labour there to a degree, and it seemed evident from my participant observation that there might be too many rather than too few hands involved there at times (speaking in terms of the garden itself, while recognizing that there are intangible benefits that volunteers can get from being there), which can confuse the technicians about who is rightfully using and taking food from the gardens as opposed to who is seen to be trespassing and stealing.

Both gardens have been highly productive in recent years, and when they are in full swing, they generate more fresh produce than the volunteers can themselves make use of. As a result, the garden technicians and the volunteers established a process where some would harvest from the gardens each week, after the direct users had taken what they wanted, and then bring these supplies to the WRRC to make them available to users of the food cupboard and to the shelter. However, when the gardens were in their most productive period in the summer of 2019, the volume of fresh produce generated even exceeded what could be absorbed by the food cupboard, to an extent that raised the surprising challenge of food wastage. One of my volunteer tasks was to make a plan to prevent this excess food generated from the gardens from going to waste, and I initiated an effort to sell excess produce at the Masonville Mall Farmer’s Market in London, Ontario, and to use the money raised there to invest back to the WRRC for the gardening program for the summer of 2020 to purchase supplies such as seeds. While this worked well in 2019, it is contingent on volunteer labour and involves a very different dynamic – using some produce for cash to turn into supplies for future gardening – than was initially envisioned, and it remains to be seen if this was a one-year experiment or will be a regular
response. This also speaks to the fact that the WRRC gardens would benefit from more coordination, most of all in how the produce is distributed, to ensure that more of the fresh produce from the gardens ends up in food insecure households in the community.

When the Meridian garden began, there was a staff member who was responsible for facilitating a weekly gardening program and workshops on a full-time basis, but since this person resigned in 2017 to focus on raising her family, the WRRC has chosen not to refill the position as they subsequently chose not to prioritize it in their budget. Key informants at the WRRC expressed the desire to introduce more gardening programs, and not only dedicating staff resources again to facilitating them but also funding more supplies and a proper kitchen at the WRRC that could be used to support such things as healthy cooking courses. However, this was not seen to be possible given state of the budget and allocation of staff resources, and thus would depend upon increased base funding from donors or else pursuing a grant, which they were considering doing as of 2019. For the time being, the distribution of food and any food education relies mainly on voluntarism.

In 2019, there was a volunteer cook who came to the WRRC every Thursday to prepare a healthy meal for the shelter residents, simultaneously involving them in the food preparation and teaching them about healthy cooking and eating. According to key informants, there was also previously a volunteer who taught WRRC residents how to can so that they could utilize the food from the gardens through the winter. Another way that the WRRC drew from the gardens in the past was through a program called ‘Bridging the Gap’, in which healthy meals and boxes of vegetables were prepared during a group counselling session, with the meals directly consumed and the boxes made available for everyone to bring home with them. In addition to food from the gardens, the WRRC also receives some food donations from local farmers every year that are
part of a tradition of a ‘Harvest Dinner’ where employees and residents of the shelter cook and then share together in a meal. As noted, the gardens themselves were bountiful in 2019, but there are a number of ideas about how the space could still be enhanced. One of the primary volunteers at the Police Station garden envisioned introducing a program called ‘Grow a Row’ in the summer of 2020. Her thought was that giving people individual responsibility for a large garden row – as distinct from labouring on a collective plot – could encourage more participation in the garden, with shelter residents or broader community volunteers able to “grow vegetables to support the food [cupboard of the WRRC], but [...] also grow their own vegetables as well”. In sum, while support from a part-time or full-time staff member would surely help the WRRC’s gardens grow, in terms of the level of participation, making better use of the total amount of food produced, and prospects for education about food, cooking, and healthy eating, there is a considerable degree of voluntarism that has made the gardens an important part of the life of the WRRC.

4.3. The Objectives and Operations of the LCFC Community Garden

The LCFC has very different core objective than the WRRC, operating several different food-oriented programs that prioritize (but are not entirely made up of) low-income community members, with its flagship activity being the provision of multiple community meals each week. In general, the Monday community meal is the most popular of the four, typically serving approximately 150 people on a weekly basis. Other weekly meals include a senior’s lunch, a wellness breakfast, and a ‘Newcomer’s Family Community Kitchen’, in which a different international-style meal is prepared by members of the community. In addition to the provision of meals, another important aspect of the LCFC is its community cooking programs that are geared towards a combination of healthy eating, food preparation skills, and food education. This
include programs geared toward: new and pregnant mothers (‘Loving Spoonful’s’); teaching kids how to plant seedlings and prepare healthy meals for their families (‘Seed, Feed, and Lead’); teaching seniors how to grow and cook fresh produce (‘Gardener’s Plate’); and more generalized drop-in cooking classes. The meals and cooking classes are complimented by a low-cost produce market, called the ‘Access Market’, that occurs every Friday. When these various services are taken together, multiple key informants estimated that roughly 500 people use the LCFC on a weekly basis. At the community meals, there are usually regulars who attend each week, but the high demand for the LCFC’s programs means that people are only allowed to register once. The demand for this range of programs reflects the strong reputation of the LCFC in the Stratford community, and serves to consistently draw in new people.

The founding of the LCFC was partly inspired by The Stop in Toronto and its model of a community food hub that flourished under the leadership of Nick Saul starting in the late 1990s, discussed in Chapter 2. The LCFC is also a member of the Community Food Centers Canada that Saul helped to found. Yet while community gardens were an important part of the transformation of The Stop from something more than a traditional food bank, the LCFC did not initially pursue this as part of its core mandate, partly due to land constraints, as there is no suitable garden land on site. Instead, the LCFC’s initial gardening education focused entirely on its large greenhouse that is located off to the side of its kitchen and dining space. In 2016, the directors of the LCFC determined that they should not allow the lack of a garden space on site to stop it from having a gardening program, and they set about seeking funding and permission to establish one. This involved: targeting nearby public land (what was then an empty field behind the Dufferin Arena); petitioning the municipality for its use in perpetuity; and seeking receiving funding from “all over the place”, as one key informant put it. The key source of funding came
from the Canada 150 program (hence the name of the garden), and it was largely built in two months of 2017 with the help of several dedicated volunteers. According to one of the garden directors, “the dream [of the community garden] was to just fill in the gap so that people know you can grow your own food,” while the role of the greenhouse became more focused on starting seedlings and growing vegetables.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the LCFC’s community garden is approximately a 13-minute walk from the LCFC, surrounded by a small urban forest, the arena parking lot, and a neighborhood. The 50 plots that are available to individuals (on a wait list) are made up of raised garden beds with mulch in between rows. The individual plots are surrounded by a wire and wood fence and locked gate only the gardeners have a code for. In the summer of 2019, the garden beds reflected a range of levels of care: some had trellises and were flourishing with herbs and vegetables, while a few were overgrown with weeds. Gardeners have access to a large water tank that can be freely refilled from a municipal tap, three rain barrels, and two gardening sheds that contain seed packets, tools such as shovels, rakes, a rototiller, and other supplies such as ties, stakes, and tomato cages. Beyond the fenced in area lies a large communal plot with eight rows of vegetables, three raised beds containing herbs, two Hugel beds (created by digging a large hole in the ground filled with compost and wood and covered with dirt to create optimal growing conditions for a variety of vegetables), fruit trees, and several pollinator flowers.

The space occasionally gets busy when families are visiting or noisy when municipal workers are cutting the grass and when someone rototills their plot, but it is otherwise a quiet and tranquil atmosphere. There are two picnic tables in the fenced-in area, and one has a shade canopy which offers gardeners a cool place to relax. The typical vegetables grown in the allotment and communal plots include squash, lettuce, beans, peas, beets, tomatoes, zucchini,
peppers, potatoes, onions, cabbage, sweet potatoes, a variety of herbs, and some berry bushes. There are no fertilizers or pesticides used in either of the communal or allotment plots.

Unlike the WRRC, the LCFC has a full-time staff member, called a Garden Skills Educator, who is dedicated to overseeing the garden volunteers, delegating tasks for the communal gardening plot, and attending to the seedlings and plants growing in the greenhouse. While the directors and staff of the LCFC value the food from the community garden, from the outset they were clear that its purpose was much more about community building and food education than it was about augmenting the supply of food to the LCFC. While people with individual plots can donate some of their harvest to the LCFC, they are entitled to take whatever they want from them for themselves. People who volunteer at the communal plot are free to take food from it as they want or need and based on my conversations with gardeners, all were confident that this trust-based approach is fair. Donations from the individual plots as well as the food harvested from the communal plot get used in the LCFC’s community meals, which also draw on some fresh produce from the greenhouse. To encourage participation, the LCFC’s
Garden Skills Educator runs a ‘Sow and Grow’ program which is directed at families who want to learn gardening skills, as well as a drop-in program oriented towards both novice and more experienced gardeners in the community who would like to volunteer their time in the communal plot, ask questions, or learn new gardening skills.

The individual plots were initially allocated on a first-come basis, and demand exceeds supply so a sign-up sheet and wait list must be maintained each year, with no specific criteria for registering. It was evident from many weeks in the garden that some individuals are far more involved in their plots than others, with a few plots receiving little care. If it was clear that someone has neglected their plot for over a month, then the LCFC Garden Educator would have a conversation with them to see if they would like to keep their plot or if they need extra help with it. As indicated, individuals are free to grow and harvest what they like in these plots, with donations to the LCFC optional, and the only condition is that they do not use pesticides or fertilizers.

Since their inception in 2017, the community gardening programs have become so popular that the LCFC has targeted a considerable expansion in their most recent five-year plan, which calls for 50 more individual plots as well as an edible forest that surrounds the gardens, a First Nations garden, and another 200 square metre communal plot (see Figure 9).
based upon my interviews with key informants and people who participated in the WRRC and the LCFC gardens had strong connections to these organizations. In the case of both of the WRRC’s gardens, most of the people who are active in maintaining the gardens (not including the technicians at the Meridian site) were first encouraged to do so by an employee from the WRRC. For instance, one heavily involved gardener in her 50s, who is active at both sites, told me that her first spark to get involved came from one of the managers at the WRRC, who indicated that the gardens needed more attention than they were getting and that this could also supplement her food needs. This volunteer is a regular user of the WRRC food cupboard, as well as other local food bank services, and since becoming involved in the WRRC gardens has found that the produce she gets from her labours has supplemented some of her vegetable intake. Yet despite her evident need, she nevertheless noted how she sees the produce from the garden largely through a community rather than an individual lens and sends most of the produce she harvests to the WRRC’s food cupboard. Although she has managed to garden for decades in spite of facing considerable personal challenges, she also described the value in this experience
in terms of learning new gardening skills, such as how to tend for new vegetables and control pests in different ways, as well as helping her to relax and keep physically active.

Another regular volunteer at both of the WRRC’s gardens, who is in her 40s and who lived in the shelter and accessed the food cupboard once a week, also indicated that her involvement began through the encouragement of a WRRC employee. Unlike the preceding individual, this woman noted her lack of prior gardening skills, and noted with pride how she had learned a lot about planting, watering, and weeding, as well as benefiting from a healthier diet when the vegetables were brought back to the food cupboard. She also described to me how gardening helped keep her mind occupied, which was important for her as she was recovering from severe emotional trauma.

Another garden participant who was also a weekly WRRC food cupboard user came from a nearby Indigenous reserve. This Indigenous woman, in her 50s, was a very skilled and experienced gardener and had started a community garden on the reserve she resides on. She described her motivation to get involved in the WRRC’s community gardens as being rooted in her desire to consume more local and organic produce and her recognition that eating more fresh food improved her overall health, as well as an appreciation for the services that the WRRC provides, and her energy was such that she was keen to garden at multiple sites, both on and off her reserve. There are also a couple women who volunteer their labour in the WRRC gardens without using the food cupboard or having a direct connection to the organization. According to one woman, in her 50s, who had long maintained a large vegetable garden in her yard, she chose to get involved because she was aware that the organization needed extra help during the harvest two years ago, and she gave generously of her time to help harvest from the WRRC gardens and take the supplies back to the food cupboard. While this involvement was very selfless, she did
indicate that it further reinforced her love of eating and cooking with fresh produce, her sense that the physical activity of gardening is beneficial, and that the WRRC’s gardens were quiet, reflective spaces that were good for her mental health.

Like the WRRC, most of the people who are engaged in the LCFC’s gardens got involved there because they already had a strong attachment to the LCFC through another program, such as a cooking class or community meal, either as users or as volunteers. For example, a man in his 60s who did not rely on the LCFC’s services but had volunteered as a cook there for two years became active in gardening through this connection. He indicated that while he had always had a passion for flower gardening, he lacked experience growing vegetables and the educational aspect of the LCFC’s gardens was especially attractive to him since had always wanted to learn. Since joining the gardening program and participating in the communal plot, he noted how he had learned many new gardening skills, such as starting seeds, and found that being involved had helped to keep him physically and socially active. Further, in his words, there is “something special about growing your food and eating it; it just tastes better. It’s good to get a little dirt under your fingernails.”

One woman, in her 50s, who maintained an individual plot as well as volunteering in (after helping to build) the communal plot, came to this involvement after having frequented the weekly community meals at the LCFC. She is a highly experienced and knowledgeable gardener who was already gardening on a considerable personal scale before getting involved in the LCFC gardens, as she indicated that her own vegetable gardens comprised a major source of her food consumption for more than two decades, which she valued for both the health benefits of fresh produce as well as the fulfillment she got from growing and caring for plants. Yet in spite of all of her knowledge about gardening, she noted how the LCFC was a learning space for her, as the
garden coordinators taught her new things about starting seeds and succession planting, as well as giving her space to augment her output.

One intellectually disabled garden participant in her 30s (who was supported throughout the interview with her father and her support worker) indicated that she first got involved at the LCFC through the weekly community meals, some cooking classes, and use of the Friday Access Market, with the latter being the spark that led her to want to garden. Her support worker helped explain that they both had learned many new gardening skills, from weeding to harvesting. Her father reported that they were consuming less processed foods since joining the community gardening program, which involved learning about new ways of cooking so they could incorporate food from the garden into their meals. Participating in the garden provided her with physical activity, kept her mind busy, and gave her something to look forward to attending every week.

Another person who came to the community garden principally through the Friday Access Market was a woman in her 40s, who started her individual plot in 2018, as well as regularly contributing to the communal plot and helping build the edible forest. She noted that her previous gardening experience was limited to flowers, and that she greatly valued the educational aspect of the LCFC garden, pointing out how she had learned a lot about pests, soil health, beneficial microbes, and the edible forest through the LCFC’s Garden Educator. She also pointed out the clear health benefits she perceived from her time in the garden, not only consuming more fresh produce but also helping her keep active physically, socially, and mentally.

An Indigenous man in his 60s came to the garden through his regular attendance at the LCFC’s Monday community meal, which led him to sign up for an individual plot. He had a lot
of prior vegetable growing experience and he valued his individual plot as a space to grow a range of things, especially traditional Indigenous herbs, as well as being a source of fulfilment and purpose, giving him something meaningful to do every day. It does not, however, make a serious dint in his food needs, as he indicated that he is a regular user of the food bank in Stratford. Another man in his 60s came to the garden through his experience volunteering at the LCFC every Friday with the ‘Newcomer’s meal’, and he secured an individual plot as well as volunteering with the communal plot. He was already an experienced gardener before this involvement but noted that he has greatly benefitted from gardening workshops, learning more about such things as pest control and organic nutrient management. Although he can afford to buy sufficient food, he also indicated that he appreciates the steady supply of fresh produce he generates from his plot, as well as its role that gardening plays in his emotional well-being and in helping him stay physically active.

4.5. Perceptions of the Food from Community Gardens

Key informants at both the WRRC and the LCFC concurred that both the users of their food services and community gardens viewed food from the gardens in a positive light, often citing that it was something to celebrate and be grateful for. For the WRRC, the main way that non-gardeners encounter this food is through the food cupboard. For the LCFC, the ways that non-gardeners encounter this food is through the community meals and the cooking classes. In general, there was more dialogue and lines of communication between the LCFC’s users and its directors than there was at the WRRC.

At the LCFC, the people managing the food supplies and preparing the community meals and cooking classes had a good sense of what was going on in the community garden, and the use of this food was well communicated to the users of the LCFC’s food services. According to
one key informant who oversees some of the cooking programs, the produce from the garden that arrives at the LCFC is not relied upon by the people who cook the community meals or run the cooking classes, but its use is communicated to people using these services, and her sense was that “people are very grateful; they’re always super excited when there’s something to harvest. It’s a triumph, it’s a success, all [the] hard work [of the gardeners] has paid off, or it’s a bonus.”

As indicated, the LCFC’s biggest community meal occurs on Mondays, and my research participants who regularly made use of this meal described this with positive terms like fresh and healthy, and one (who was also a gardener) noted his appreciation for the fact that there was always a vegetarian option to support his dietary preferences. While this participant disagreed with the large amount of meat that is typically served at the community meals, he nevertheless appreciated that produce from the gardens was utilized as much as possible. The support for vegetarian diets amid otherwise meat-heavy meals was echoed by another community gardener, who is also a vegetarian, and regularly makes use of the Monday meal, the senior’s lunch, and the Access Market. Another participant who is both a gardener and a regular Monday meal user described the amount of fresh produce served at the meals as a “big deal” for her in general, and was excited to know when some had come from the garden. A different regular user of the Monday meal described it as being consistently “nutritious and adventurous,” but noted his perception that “a lot of people don’t eat the greens on their plate here,” which he suggested could have to do with “how they grew up” or with the fact that many LCFC meal users rely heavily on the food bank in Stratford “and 90 percent of the food from the food bank is processed.” However, one participant did indicate how participating in a cooking program at the LCFC had led him to be more creative in meal preparation and consumption, and more willing to try new things. Ultimately, it seemed clear that while that food from the gardens is integrated
into various LCFC programs, it comprises a small share of the overall food supplies these programs use and is ultimately most treasured by those users of the LCFC who participate in the garden themselves. As a key informant at the LCFC put it:

The gardeners themselves speak to how valuable it is to them. In terms of eating more produce, or saving money on produce, a lot of them get excited by what they grow, or to introduce their kids to it. I think people really value it as a treasure, as something special. The value of growing with your own hands and see it and nurture it and eat it is really special.

Although more produce is generated by the WRRC gardens than with the LCFC gardens, in general there is less communication between the gardeners and both the WRRC leadership and staff and the food cupboard users than occurs at the LCFC. Key informants at the WRRC consistently expressed an assumption that food cupboard users did not, for the most part, know what to do with the garden produce. For example, one key informant explained that she felt that the women who regularly use the food cupboard and know about the nutritional value of the produce and “have the skills to utilize those foods are excited” about the food coming into the WRRC from the gardens, “but those who don’t – it’s almost not on their radar, so they don’t really comment and just avoid it.” Another key informant echoed this point, describing how food cupboard users will often take the vegetables that they recognize, and might occasionally be willing to try something they are unfamiliar with, but in general value things like canned goods, pasta, and rice more, as this “stuff from the cupboard goes first and then the veggies are chosen.”

Here, the significance of the different mandates between the WRRC and LCFC is clear and any potential for comparison breaks down, as there is clearly a different capacity to absorb garden produce if it is going into large community meals and cooking classes versus if it is reliant on the food literacy of individuals struggling to secure sufficient food. Yet in spite of the general preference for processed food in food cupboard, some key informants the WRRC did express a strong sense that food cupboard users do view the fresh produce in a positive light, with one
pointing out that she even had received requests for the food cupboard to have more fresh produce.

Not surprisingly, as with the LCFC, I found that it was the people who were most engaged with the WRRC’s community gardens who were more inclined to recognize and value the health benefits associated with the fresh produce that came from the gardens. Those participants who were active in the gardens and relied on the food cupboard indicated that they were not necessarily consuming greater quantities of food because of the gardens, but they did stress their perception that they were eating healthier because they were consuming much more fresh produce, as well as noting that they found it easy to find recipes to make use of this food. A few of the active gardeners also reported that they canned and blanched produce from the garden the previous year, which lasted them into the winter months, and were planning on doing so again. A few food cupboard users who were active gardeners lamented that the fresh produce options in the food cupboard were sometimes limited, although one responded who pointed this out then went on to say that her preferred type of food to consume was “ready-made dinners, frozen dinners would be best, lasagna or stuff like that. Easy things”.

For the small group of participants who used the WRRC’s food cupboard regularly and did not engage in the gardens, there were mixed attitudes about the significance of the garden produce. A mother and daughter who were regular food cupboard users, and did not garden, indicated some dissatisfaction with the frequent shortage of healthy and fresh options and many of the things they preferred, noting how they made use of the grocery store when they could. Another regular food cupboard user who was not a gardener also agreed that the amount of fresh produce in the food cupboard had improved but felt that users of the WRRC’s food cupboard would benefit from having some resources that provide guidance on what to do with it.
4.6. The Multidimensional Health Benefits of Community Gardening

4.6.1. The Mental Health Benefits from Increased Social Interaction

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, one of the most consistent ways that participants who were engaged in gardening in both cases described its value was in terms of the beneficial social impacts it had for them and for others, which were in turn often discussed in relation to improved health. One woman, who was a regular volunteer at the WRRC’s gardens, noted that their benefits reach far beyond “feeding people” and can have an important part to play in “supporting their mental health, among other positive benefits,” such as promoting friendship and “a sense of community in the garden.” She also described the community garden as a “good, neutral safe place for people to get to know each other.” The LCFC garden has a stronger sense of community than the WRRC gardens, due to the regular gardening programs combined with the greater overall level of participation, and it is not surprising that many of these gardeners spoke enthusiastically about how much they valued the regular social interactions they had there. Many described the LCFC garden in terms of non-food benefits, such as being a space to create friendships, learn from others, uplift their mood, and encounter people they normally would not meet or interact with. As one participant, who was in his 60s, recently retired, and new to Stratford, put it, “being out gardening with other people is a lot of fun. You learn a lot; there’s just so much experience. We have a lot to share, and gardeners tend to love to [share].” He described gardening as an important social outing for him, that gave him something to look forward to every week and enabled him to create a social network that he quickly came to rely on. Another regular community gardener in his 60s also noted that part of the reason he enjoyed spending time in the garden was because it allowed him to meet and communicate with people he normally would not have, such as “people who fell on hard times” and “newcomers” to
Stratford, which allowed him to break out of what he called the “bubble” of living in “a conservative town.” A woman in her 50s also described the garden as an excellent way of meeting new people, and a woman in her 40s suggested that time in the garden can have an even bigger role bridging social divisions:

I would encourage anybody who has the opportunity to participate in a community garden to do that, it brings us together in a positive way, because we’re working towards a common goal. Three’s so many things that keep us separated and this is a way that keeps us together.

My participant observation strongly affirmed the preceding narratives, as I consistently found people engaged in very friendly conversations as they worked or took breaks, discussing a wide range of topics, from recipes to restaurants, vacations to their children, to the simple enjoyment of being in the garden. Sometimes I even reflected on how therapeutic gardening was for my own well-being and state of mind. It was very clear to me that the participants sincerely looked forward to seeing each other every week and had a real interest when they asked each other “how are you doing?” It was impressive for me to see people consistently pitch in their labour to the communal plot as much as they were physically able to, and the harvest from that plot was always shared out in a friendly and fair manor reflecting the strong social bonds that had been established. Further, people often readily shared some produce from their individual plots with their neighbours as they harvested it.

4.6.2. The Mental Health Benefits from Activity, Accomplishment, and Reflection

Another important way that my participants regularly described the mental health benefits from gardening was in terms of the personal sense of accomplishment and self-sufficiency they (and others) get from working hard, seeing this effort come to life in a harvest, and producing some of their own food. An intellectually disabled participant and her support worker agreed that they looked forward to going to the LCFC garden every week in part because they were excited to see how their previous efforts had impacted the garden. The support worker
also indicated that this regular outing benefitted her own mental health, explaining that her time in the garden took her away from otherwise mundane daily activities, such as watching television, and always “lifted [her] up a little bit.” Another participant who contributed to the LCFC communal plot noted how he liked feeling like he did something that day, as well as gaining a sense of satisfaction from “helping others by growing great vegetables.” A woman who puts in a great deal of effort at the WRRC community gardens described how this had helped her through a difficult court battle, explaining that seeing “those veggies growing [and] knowing they would support people to become healthy – that was my own therapy.” Another regular volunteer at the WRRC gardens indicated her sense of inspiration and pride at knowing that she was “helping to provide others with healthy food” and contributing to the greater good of the community.

Others described the sense of accomplishment in more individualistic terms. One woman who produces a range of vegetables from the LCFC gardens (as well as raising chickens at home for eggs) said that “you are more self-sufficient if you’re growing your own food,” and described this as a goal she had been striving towards for years. This was echoed by another regular LCFC gardener:

> It’s definitely affirming to see something you planted start to create the fruit you’re gonna be able to harvest. So, it gives you a sense of self-sufficiency. It’s so different than going to a grocery store where you’re removed from how it was created, whereas something like [gardening] is so hands-on.

The desire for increased self-sufficiency was also connected to a sense of empowerment by a woman who regularly volunteers at the WRRC gardens and uses the food cupboard, who explained that she was even attempting to make her pond water at home drinkable.

Another mental health benefit that gardeners regularly identified was the peace of mind they took from being in a tranquil and comforting atmosphere and feeling more connected to
nature. One woman described the WRRC’s Meridian garden as both a “good place to appreciate nature” and “a great place to spend quiet time and reflection.” A gardener at the LCFC’s gardens similarly spoke of the positive feelings she got from being “surrounded by trees, birds, the sound of bugs,” and suggested that “the more time you spend in nature the greater your mood.” Another participant who also cherished his time in the LCFC’s gardens spoke about how it helped him feel more connected with nature and how he found getting his hands dirty in the soil therapeutic, and also noted that he found being in the LCFC’s greenhouse “in the dead of winter” to be “very uplifting” for his mood. In separate interviews, two different women engaged in the WRRC’s gardens used the term “happy place” to describe their sense of the garden, with one noting how “gardening helps take her mind off things like home,” (where she experienced personal trauma) and that she often further reflects on her time in the garden after she showers off and goes for a walk. One participant who had an individual plot as well as being active in the LCFC’s communal garden described gaining a sense of comfort and healing from this space and from the process of taking care of plants.

The preceding narratives also resonated with me throughout the course of my fieldwork in both the WRRC and the LCFC community gardens, as I found my work in these spaces to be a very therapeutic experience. My fieldnotes contain frequent descriptions about how peaceful the atmosphere of the gardens were, and the enjoyment I took from the smell of dirt, flowers, and vegetables and the soothing sounds of crickets and birds, as well as distant voices in the background – which even the rumbling of a lawnmower every once in a while did not disrupt. Just as many of my participants described, I found that getting my hands dirty in the course of growing food made me feel connected to nature, and there was never a time when I felt distressed as I was working with the soil.
4.6.3. The Health Benefits from Exercise

In addition to the increased awareness about nutrition and access to fresh produce, which have already been discussed, the other principal way that participants described the physical health benefits from gardening was in terms of the increased exercise they got from it. The majority of the gardeners at the LCFC I spoke with biked to the garden, which augmented the exercise from the gardening itself. As noted, some participants perceived the distance between the WRRC and the gardens as a barrier to some people getting involved, and only two participants who were regular gardeners described walking to either the Meridian or the Police Station garden. At both sites, participants over the age of 50 consistently noted how they viewed gardening as a significant form of exercise that was not too strenuous and did not hurt their bodies. Two women in their 50s directly connected their efforts in the WRRC’s gardens to improved health outcomes, with one noting that it helped with her knee pain and made her feel better than when she did not engage in gardening, and another describing how she had more physical strength at the end of each summer. This was echoed by another gardener in her 50s who suggested that the garden provided her with “holistic healing” from various physical ailments, and that this reverberates on improved mental health. In her words, “gardening is significant. I feel that when you have a good balance of nutrition and exercise, you have a good balanced mental health”.

Almost all participants from both case study sites noted their sense that the community gardens acted as a spur to get them outside and become more physically active than they otherwise would be. As indicated earlier, the support worker for the intellectually disabled participant appreciated the disruption the garden brought to her usual rhythm and noted how being challenged to use their bodies in different ways, like bending and squatting, was beneficial
for both her and the woman she helped. Another regular garden participant in her 50s commented that she has not only become more aware of the taste of fresh food but was getting more exercise than she did before starting to garden. A woman in her 40s who was an active gardener at the LCFC and heavily involved in creating the edible forest explained how she took particular enjoyment from the more vigorous exercise of the heavier work that went into establishing the forest. One community gardener in his 60s did not sense that it brought a major change to his overall level of physical activity, but the greater physical benefit in his eyes simply came from encouraging him to spend more time outside in the sun. He noted that during his experience volunteering in the kitchen at the LCFC, he got the sense that dietary improvements and increased exercise often went hand-in-hand in establishing healthier lifestyles. In his words, “it’s a really wonderful concept, as opposed to just feeding people. It’s the whole idea of growing it to cooking it to eating it. That’s the magic for me.”

Gardening can occasionally be physically intensive, such as rototilling thick dirt or using a spade to turn up soil, but for the most part it is a leisurely activity. Although I am an active person and keep fit with high-intensity interval training, I found that the gardening I did in the course of my fieldwork in each community garden provided me with a valuable source of exercise that complimented my regular workout routines. I also appreciated how my mind was occupied in the course of this exercise – including being stimulated to think critically about the foods I regularly purchase and consume – and how I felt like I was being productive with respect to something beyond myself.

4.7. The Limits of Engagement in Community Gardening

Although neither organization could give definitive numbers about how many people use their food services on a regular basis, it was clear to me that active gardeners comprise a small
proportion of the total population who rely on the WRRC and the LCFC to meet at least some share of their food needs. I found it difficult to assess this relatively modest level of engagement, which would have required a more systematic approach to sampling the respective populations of non-gardeners, and based on my experience, it is unlikely that most of the people who use the WRRC’s and the LCFC’s food services but do not engage in the gardens would be keen to participate in research about the subject of gardening. The only person who I interviewed who used the LCFC’s services, but did not garden, was a man in his 50s, and he did not offer any insight into broader barriers to gardening, attributing his own lack of participation to personal laziness and his lack of enjoyment socializing with others. As indicated in Chapter 3, I found that it was the people who were most engaged in gardening who tended to be more excited to speak to me about it and other issues pertaining to food. Yet in spite of the fact that my interviews were skewed, I believe that both my key informants and my participants (both those active in gardening and those who were not) have a good deal of insight into not only the motivations to garden but also some of the barriers inhibiting greater levels of participation.

At the WRRC, a number of key informants suggested that the organization had not given enough attention to encouraging people living at the shelter and relying on the food cupboard to get involved at the community gardens. One clear reflection of this could be seen in the fact that a mother and daughter who were regular users of the food cupboard and lamented its frequent shortage of healthy options both noted they had never even heard of the community gardens before I mentioned them. Another reflection of the lack of communication is that a regular volunteer at the WRRC gardens pointed out her sense that it needs to be made clearer to the women that they “are free to keep produce for themselves in exchange for [their] labour in the garden.” The majority of the people who volunteered in the WRRC’s gardens explained their
sense that there would a greater level of participation if the garden was divided into individual plots rather than being maintained as a communal one, or at least if there was some combination of the two approaches. However, one regular garden volunteer in her 50s did explicitly indicate her preference for the communal approach because she liked the spirit it fostered when “everyone has the same goal and all participants hopefully perform the same tasks.”

One key informant at the WRRC indicated her sense that interest in the community gardens among food cupboard users is, for some, motivated by a sense of wanting to “give back” to the food cupboard service, while another key informant described the principal interests in terms of “look[ing] forward to the vegetables.” A key informant who knows many of the women who volunteer in the gardens concurred that there are aspects of both giving back and getting good food that could motivate involvement in the gardens, and indicated her sense that the lack of transportation to the gardens comprised a major barrier for several individuals, compared to if the gardens were adjacent to the WRRC. This concern was echoed by a woman in her 30s who lived in the shelter and relied on the food cupboard, as she expressed an interest in gardening and pointed to her lack of transportation as the biggest thing stopping her; even though she completed most of her errands on foot, she did not like the thought of having to carry vegetables from the gardens in addition to having a baby stroller to push.

As indicated, there is a considerably larger population that interacts with the LCFC on a regular basis than is the case with the WRRC, which obviously translates to a larger population of potential gardeners. As has also been indicated, a number of the people who are active in the LCFC’s garden do not rely on its services but rather volunteer in some way. One key informant at the LCFC indicated that this large community of active volunteers has been an important part of the vibrancy of the garden, while noting that many of the people who use the LCFC’s services
face a range of barriers to participation, from physical disabilities to time pressures. Another key informant drew attention to the problem of proximity that was also noted with the WRRC, suggesting that more LCFC users and volunteers might be inclined to participate in the community garden if it was on-site, contrasting the difficulty of convincing people to walk to the garden with the relative ease of recruiting them to cooking programs. Another key informant estimated that only about 10 percent of the LCFC’s meal users have gotten involved with gardening as of the summer of 2019, and while he recognized that some of this is inevitable – as in his words, “not everyone wants to get outside and get dirty” – he tried to help people overcome more specific objections he has heard, like lamenting being too old to garden, that it is too physically demanding, and that they lack the knowledge and skills.

Most of the research participants who were active in the LCFC’s garden indicated that while they valued the idea of the communal plot and were happy to volunteer some of their labour in it, they felt that more people would be likely to either start in the first place or else come to the garden more frequently if they had their own plot. For instance, one man in his 60s who volunteers his labour in the communal plot once a week (only when the LCFC’s Garden Educator is present), lamented his lack of access to an individual plot because he loves to spend time in nature and would like to experiment with growing different varieties of vegetables, noting that “if I had my own [plot] for sure I’d be here every other day.” Another gardener in his 60s who does have an individual plot described the communal plot as feeling too overwhelming for him. In contrast, a few gardeners with individual plots stressed the value they attached to the communal plot. One gardener in her 50s indicated how the communal plot helps her “to learn and discover things you didn’t know,” and went so far as to say that “if I had to pick one it would be the community garden because it’s big enough for everyone to get food,” even as she
acknowledged that she has more incentive to visit her individual plot because no one else weeded or harvested it and appreciates the greater flexibility it affords. Another gardener in her 40s echoed this point, noting that although she appreciated the fact that she could grow and “harvest more of what [she was] particularly interested in” in her individual plot, she preferred the social benefits of the communal garden.

Key informants at both the WRRC and the LCFC indicated that the growth of the gardening programs as of the summer of 2019 had relied on a range of communications, including word of mouth, posters, hosted workshops at the gardens, and having a designated staff member to facilitate programming at the gardens. The importance of the staff support for the LCFC’s garden was clear to me from my time in the gardens, as was the absence of a staff member with respect to the WRRC’s gardens (recalling that this ended there in 2017). A number of key informants at the WRRC noted how the level of participation in the gardens would benefit from having gardening workshops, though they recognized the organization is not in a position to afford this at this time, and instead was restricted to much more limited promotional activities like posters. As one key informant noted, the ability to run gardening workshops could simultaneously help “to take away some of that fear” around the lack of knowledge and skills that is a barrier for some, as well as showing women who rely on the WRRC that gardening can be “a form of healing and building relationships in the community.” One woman who regularly volunteers at the WRRC’s gardens suggested that if workshops were to materialize attendance would benefit from some sort of coordinated transportation to the garden.

Although the LCFC garden has the advantage of a dedicated staff member to run regular workshops and coordinate efforts, as compared with the WRRC, some participants suggested the organization could still benefit from trying further outreach methods to motivate more regular
meal users to get involved in gardening programs. One key informant suggested they could encourage people to visit the garden as a group right after a community meal. Another key informant made a similar point, suggesting that greenhouse visits could be an easier first step before a garden visit, before indicating the desire for growth, noting that there are many “people that come to our meals, to our market, to our cooking programs” and “the hope is that we can take them that step further where they’re [getting more engaged in] gardening.”

4.8. Barriers to Building and Expanding the Gardening Programs

A central argument of this thesis is that the development of community gardening programs can bring considerable positive benefits for low-income people who rely on community food services such as the WRRC’s food cupboard and the LCFC’s community meals. However, these case studies also shed light on some significant limitations to developing these relations, from the perspectives of both the institutions and the users. On the institutional side, the biggest barrier is the challenge of generating sufficient funding, which was a concern raised by all of key informants of both the WRRC and the LCFC. As indicated earlier, the WRRC and the LCFC are financed through a combination of federal, provincial, and municipal government funding, as well as receiving some donations from local businesses and individuals. As is the case with many non-profit organizations, sustaining a consistent level of funding can be challenging, especially given that grants typically involve different time-cycles and some are relatively short-term. This means that budgets must be re-evaluated from year to year, and that organizations must devote a considerable amount of time and institutional capacity to fundraising. The WRRC does not have specific funding to dedicate much staff resources to overseeing the gardens, and one reflection of this is that they lack the sort of coordinated outreach and programs, such as gardening workshops for users, that the LCFC has pursued. As
one key informant from the WRRC explained to me, their funding priorities center upon providing emergency shelter for women experiencing trauma, and while they believe that the community gardens can make an impact as a holistic healing tool that augments their core mission, they initiated the gardens without the support of a dedicated grant and without the capacity to divert any operating funds from the crucial service they provide. The result is that the growth of the gardens, however desirable, is seen as a slow, long-term project that must rely more on voluntarism than paid staff labour if it is to expand further.

Obviously the LCFC has a very different foundational objective than the WRRC, centered on enhancing access to “good food for all,” and it is therefore not surprising they have committed more dedicated funds and staff resources to building their community gardening program. However, some key informants did make it clear that funds and staff capacity were limited relative to the LCFC’s ambitious plan to expand its community garden in terms of size, output, and activity in the coming five years, and one employee specifically noted that more staff labour would need to be invested for this to materialize. Another employee who also acknowledged limits in the amount of funds and staff time that can be dedicated to the community garden, noted that “it’s a not for profit so there’s always going to be challenges; we work with volunteers, we work with donations, you work with what you’ve got,” implying that the anticipated growth would rely to a considerable extent on the initiative taken by volunteers as much or more as staff efforts. Here, however, she also sounded a note of confidence, explaining that both staff and volunteers are “really committed to make it [the gardening program] work and a strong belief in what we’re doing.” She also felt that the gardening programs were already starting to make an impact and have a positive influence on people’s lives, and that the more this was recognized the more it would inspire further efforts.
Based on my interviews and time spent gardening, the physical spaces of the gardens of both the WRRC and the LCFC, though modest, are not too small relative to the scale of current participation. For the WRRC, there was unanimity among key informants that there is sufficient land contained in the communal plots for the foreseeable future, especially as the Police Station garden had recently been expanded. Further, as noted, the WRRC’s food cupboard was already wasting some of the fresh produce generated by the gardens, implying that unless food cupboard users began to make greater use of the food supplied by the gardens, then expansion would mainly end up generating more food waste. Although the LCFC’s present space at Dufferin Park is adequate relative to the present level of activity, and also contains more land to potentially cultivate, it is much more plausible to see land access becoming a barrier to growth for the LCFC’s gardening program than it is for the WRRC. It is also more plausible to see the LCFC’s community meal programs and food center service having greater potential to make use of expanded volumes of fresh produce from the gardens than occurs with the WRRC’s food cupboard. The possibility that land access could become a more pressing concern for the LCFC partly depends on the degree to which more budgetary and staff resources and volunteer efforts get invested in the coming years.

However, as one director from the LCFC suggested, land access could also be conceived more broadly than just potentially expanding at Dufferin Park, as “it would be great to see several other locations that could serve other parts of the city.” This point was echoed by a participant who volunteered at the LCFC’s communal plot as well as having her own individual one, who expressed her hope to see community gardens dotting the city “so that more people have closer access that they could walk to.” In other words, demand for land for community gardens and the desirability of gardening programs should not only be assessed in terms of
present levels of participation in the existing gardens, as some might be more inclined to participate if there were garden sites closer to their homes. In my interviews with key informants at the LCFC, I pointed out the fact that there are multiple underused public plots of land in Stratford that could conceivably be utilized for community garden expansion, but I was repeatedly cautioned against being overly optimistic about the prospect for acquisition and conversion to gardens. Two key barriers were identified. First, gaining access to public land can still involve a great deal of legal complexity, even for a non-profit organization like the LCFC that holds a considerable amount of support and goodwill in the community, whether negotiating with municipal, provincial, or federal government bodies. Second, plots of public land are sometimes unsuitable for gardens because they are too close to past or present land uses, like factories or waste treatment facilities, that generate localized pollutants that adversely affect the health of the air and soil.

Regardless of whether the LCFC expands the land area for its garden programs at Dufferin Park or elsewhere, one concern that was raised by the majority of gardeners I spoke with was that some of the individual plots were being insufficiently used. One gardener noted that he felt it was unfair that he spent so much energy and time on his plot while others failed to take care of theirs, because this allowed weeds to take root and spread, as well as detracting from the overall aesthetic of the garden. Another gardener, who regularly used the communal plot but did not have access to an individual plot, also expressed his frustration that he was on the waitlist while some people who had individual plots failed to tend to this “precious” space. While staff at the LCFC were attempting to address this issue by checking in with individual plot users who did not tend to their plot frequently enough, and offering them extra help, ultimately there is a degree
of subjectivity in how individual participation and commitment is assessed and how it could be used to remove someone’s access to a plot, which is compounded things like life circumstances.

4.9. Barriers to Greater Participation in the Gardens for Users of the WRRC and the LCFC

The most consistent barrier to participation in the community gardens that research participants at both sites identified was transportation. Even though the two community gardens are both less than a 2 kilometer walk from the WRRC, this is a prohibitive distance for some, especially for mothers who have to carry or walk with small children. It might not be far, but it is far enough to make the thought of lugging heavy bags of produce undesirable for some. The issue of distance – for WRRC residents and other garden participants who do not live on site – is also complicated by the fact that Strathroy is too small to have a public transit system. Key informants at the WRRC noted how distance can also limit the ability of women who occasionally use the WRRC’s food cupboard but do not live on site from accessing its supplies, including produce from the garden. The WRRC has responded to this by making some direct food deliveries, but this is not something the organization has the capacity to do consistently.

Transportation is also a barrier for some participants in the LCFC’s garden program, as well as a general issue for access to its core services like community meals, cooking classes, and its subsidized market. This is especially pronounced for some users who live in the country who do not have access to a car. Stratford does have a public transit system, but it is limited in terms of regularity and routes. No bus routes run close to the garden, and most gardeners get there by foot or bicycle. This means that if people do not live close by or have a car, the garden is difficult to access, which can be especially prohibitive for people with young children.

Another factor that affects participation in community gardens is whether people are able-bodied or not; for instance, seniors with severe arthritis and individuals with physical
disabilities have trouble gardening. As one key informant with the LCFC put it, the success of the communal garden plot benefits from “having a strong volunteer base” associated with the broader organization, as it includes many individuals who are fit and keen gardeners. However, neither the WRRC nor the LCFC has the capacity to accommodate people with physical disabilities at the community gardens. All three gardens have significant barriers for anyone who uses a walker or a wheelchair, and one regular contributor to the LCFC’s communal plot expressed her wish that the space could be made more accommodating through things like “more raised beds, like high up ones, for people who have walkers or disabilities and can’t get down to ground level where wheelchairs can reach. It’s an accessibility issue.” Another barrier to access that is especially noteworthy for the WRRC relates to perceptions of risk and security. One research participant, who was a regular gardener at the WRRC’s Police Station garden, pointed to her history of trauma and abuse in explaining that she did not feel safe attending the gardens alone. One way to mitigate this fear and enhance the sense of safety, at least to some extent, is if people know there are others who will be in the garden. Although the WRRC does not have the staff resources to devote to the gardens, the sense of safety could be enhanced by coordinating volunteers or specifying key windows in the day where there will be at least one regular volunteer present, as well as by the general growth of a gardening culture over time if the garden can become a more vibrant social space.

Although both the WRRC and the LCFC have important roles in improving the access to food for low income people in their respective communities, and try very hard to be welcoming spaces, their ability to provide these services can nevertheless be impeded by social factors beyond their control, such as the social anxiety that some people face. One key informant at the LCFC expressed her sense that the crowds at the community meals and also at the weekly
gardening groups can feel intimidating and cliquey for some, especially newcomers, which suggests that there are broader challenges to making these spaces more inclusive that need to be regularly reflected on.

Key informants at both the WRRC and the LCFC indicated their sense that some participants feel ashamed about using their services and that this was difficult to avoid, at least at some level. As one employee of the LCFC put it, “maybe the stigma is a barrier for who the center is for and what it’s for; it’s always going to be a bit of a barrier I think.” This was echoed by another LCFC employee, who explained:

I know there are a lot of people who know about the Local and feel like they don’t belong here; whether they feel like they’re not poor enough or not needy enough to be here. But I think there’s a big portion of our population that could definitely benefit from being here, so I guess stigma is still a barrier.

It was clear from my research that the employees at both the WRRC and the LCFC are highly conscious of the stigmas that some people attached to accessing their services in a general sense, and this reverberates on the use of the community gardens as they are still affiliated with the WRRC’s and the LCFC’s main goals of addressing food insecurity and poverty.

At the WRRC, there is a prevailing assumption that food cupboard users lack food literacy, are uneducated about fresh produce preparation and nutrition guidelines, and generally prefer highly processed and easy to prepare food over fresh produce from the garden. In contrast, at the LCFC, there is an expectation that users of the Access Market would be more inclined to select fresh produce if they could afford it, with cost and income viewed as a greater barrier than food illiteracy to making use of garden produce. In addition, the LCFC has the advantage of incorporating the fresh produce into its community meals, which means there is little risk that the fresh produce from the garden will be wasted, even if there were to be rising volume in the future.
4.10. Conclusion

This chapter began with a discussion of the WRRC’s and the LCFC’s locations, their institutional objectives, and how the community gardening initiatives arose and relate to the various programming that each organization offers. The analysis then considered the different motivations spurring individuals to join the gardening programs associated with the WRRC and the LCFC, which included such factors as: the love of gardening or the desire to learn; the hope of accessing more fresh produce; and the desire to support an organization they believed in. The discussion then turned to how participants view the food produced in the community gardens, and the reasons they value it, which start from the perspective of health and increased access to (and awareness about) nutritious food, although a few participants who rely on the WRRC’s food cupboard indicated their preference for processed foods even when produce from the garden is on the shelves. A central part of the chapter was in exploring the different ways that participants who were active in gardening articulated their perception of the health benefits it brought. One pillar of this was the increased social interaction, which was especially true with the case of the LCFC garden, where a strong social network is evident, with multiple participants indicating that they had come to rely on this community and looked forward to their social interactions in the garden every week. Another way that many participants described the mental health benefits from gardening was in terms of the relaxing and healing atmosphere these spaces provide. Some also spoke of a sense of empowerment, increased self-sufficiency from growing one’s own food, and individual accomplishment or making a contribution to the broader community. Another significant finding was that many participants described the physical health benefits from gardening as not only centering on the food itself, and the increased attention to nutrition and healthy eating, but also on the exercise it entails.
In spite of these multidimensional benefits acknowledged by active gardeners, only a small share of the number of people who regularly use the food services at both the WRRC and the LCFC are active gardeners, and the discussion considered why this might be so, recognizing that this is a difficult question to unpack since many of the people who are not active in gardening do not want to participate in research focused on questions about gardens. In both cases, this disjuncture was seen to relate to a range of factors, including some communication failures, a shortage of promotion, the physical distance between the WRRC and LCFC buildings and the gardens themselves (and the lack of transportation), and the fact that some might be more motivated by having an individual plot rather than (or in addition to) a communal one. On the organizational side, the barriers to the growth of gardening programs include the importance of having dedicated staff to run programs to make gardens vibrant spaces, set against the reality that non-profits like the WRRC and the LCFC have limited resources and cannot easily divert funds away from their core missions, with the implication that prospects for growth are likely to hinge on the level of voluntarism that can be sustained and encouraged.
5. Conclusion

5.1. Key Findings

At the outset of my fieldwork, I recognized that it was implausible to expect that community gardens could have a significant impact on the food security of the sorts of people who rely on the food services provided by the WRRC and the LCFC, and in any event that these impacts were not something that I could empirically measure in the course of one field season. My summer immersed in these environments affirmed this impression that the scale of fresh fruits and vegetables produced and harvested at the WRRC and the LCFC gardens are, while impressive, (especially in the case of the WRRC) not at a scale that could contribute to serious improvements in the food security of their usership at large. Nevertheless, I emerged from this research thoroughly convinced that, regardless of the volumes of produce harvested, the gardens can have a range of positive health impacts on the communities who rely on the services on these sorts of organizations, which obviously start from the food itself but also extend far beyond it.

The first research question I sought to answer concerned the practical relations between food banks and food centers and recently established community garden programs, and this relates to the motivations of establishing them. I found that the multidimensional benefits of the community gardens clearly reflect the core motivations behind why the WRRC and the LCFC initiated them to begin with. Both organizations envisioned the gardens as a means to help the communities they serve improve their access to fresh produce, as well as to learn more about growing food and to encourage healthy food choices. For the WRRC, another core goal was to provide therapeutic spaces that could offer opportunities for relaxation, recreation, and emotional healing among women who are facing trauma. For the LCFC, the goals of enhanced food literacy and community outreach were more prominent, reflecting their institutional mandate as a
community food center, and this involved more dedicated staff resources to build their gardening programs. In both cases, participants who were involved in community gardens indicated that the desire to consume more fresh fruits and vegetables was a central motivating factor for them and, not surprisingly, they consistently expressed a strong sense that their consumption of fresh produce had increased with this engagement. Participants also indicated that they had become more aware of how to grow food and in some cases, had gained knowledge about how to prepare it, which is strongly in line with the literature on community gardening (Curtis & Saul, 2013; Grubb & Vogl, 2019; Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017). In addition, both the behavioural changes and the increased knowledge associated with community gardening were often discussed in ways that made it clear that these were a source of pride for participants.

The second research question I sought to answer concerned the attitudes of food bank and food center users, and whether they valued the food from community gardens that are made available within food banks and food centers, and why or why not this was so. My central finding here was that participants who were engaged in the community gardens seemed to value the produce generated by these spaces more than participants who primarily used the food services of the WRRC and the LCFC. Although I was not able to speak to many users of the WRRC food cupboard or the LCFC services who were not directly engaged in community gardening, I do believe that I managed to get a good sense of the benefits and limitations of the garden produce from the few participants I did speak with from this vantage, which was augmented by insights from the key informants and from my time spent in the WRRC food cupboard and at the LCFC community meals. In the case of the WRRC, it is clear that heavily processed and packaged foodstuffs continue to constitute the bulk of the available foods that users access through the food cupboard, and that this is the primary way these services are
valued by users. I was surprised to find there was more food coming out of the gardens over the summer than the food cupboard could distribute, especially during a few periods when the harvest was especially bountiful, than the food cupboard could distribute. This led to my effort to try to sell garden produce at a farmer’s market in London as a fundraiser, which is something I was certainly not expecting when I set about my research. While a few users of the food cupboard did value the food from the gardens, and a few gardeners explicitly identified this dynamic as motivating them to participate as a means to give back to the organization, there seems to be considerable room for improvement in encouraging consumption of the garden produce, as I will discuss in the following section. In the case of the LCFC, the various programs that are at the heart of the organization, such as multiple community meals and cooking and gardening programs, give it a greater capacity to absorb the produce that comes from the communal garden plot or is donated from individual plots. For the LCFC, the garden produce is a very small share of its overall supplies, and even with the planned expansion of the garden it should have little problem ensuring this food is put to good use.

For community gardeners, it was clear that participation in the gardens enhanced their access to free fresh produce, at least for the summer months, and some gardeners explained how they canned produce from the garden to ensure they could continue consuming it into the winter months. However, this benefit was primarily evident for participants who seemingly had a high degree of food literacy, and although I did not manage to speak to many food bank and food center users who did not garden, based on interviews with key informants and my participant observation, it was clear that many non-gardeners still chose processed and packaged food items when fresh produce was available. It was evident that while community gardens can introduce more fresh produce to food banks and food centers and enhance options, this does not guarantee
that the users of these services will automatically increase their consumption of the fresh produce, as there are a number of factors that affect these decisions, including food illiteracy, time constraints, lack of kitchen equipment, or a taste preference for processed items. This limitation reflects the importance of pairing gardening programs with things like cooking, gardening, and canning workshops, which has the potential to increase the use of fresh produce among these constituencies.

The third research question I sought to answer was whether food bank and food center users feel encouraged to participate in the practice of community gardens, or whether they were disinterested or saw participation as being an added burden. In spite of the multidimensional benefits described by active gardeners in both case study sites, it was clear that gardeners comprise a small share of the overall population of people who use the food services, which reiterated the significance of my original question. I found myself repeatedly thinking about the factors that are inhibiting greater involvement. As I stressed in Chapter 4, I found it difficult to get food service users who did not garden to speak to me about their attitudes about the gardens, but some of these barriers came through in discussions with key informants, both gardening and non-gardening participants, and from my time spent in the gardens. Some of the main reasons why users of the WRRC’s food cupboard and the LCFC’s food services were not involved in the community gardens relate to the mental barriers posed by a lack of gardening skills and experience (which again the LCFC has a greater capacity to address), inadequate promotion and advertisement on behalf of the organizations, and the physical distance between the organizations and the gardens, which is amplified for some by a lack of transportation.

The fourth research question I sought to answer was whether community garden participants value these spaces and attaching meaning to them. From the very outset of my
research, it was clear to me that gardening participants valued the gardens not only for the food they generated, but for an array of other physical and social benefits. This finding affirms some prominent themes in the literature on community gardening (Marsh et al., 2018; Lanier et al., 2015; Firth et al., 2011; Wakefield et al., 2007), in particular that gardens tend to be deeply valued for the sense of community and social networks they can generate – although in my research this culture was definitely clearer at the LCFC community garden than with the WRRC gardens. The stronger sense of community at the LCFC gardens reflects the staff resources that are dedicated to outreach and educational workshops, as well as the greater number of gardeners.

In other words, a sense of community seems to be both a cause and an effect, as some participants expressed how they are more inclined to garden if they are likely to see other people there, as is the case with the LCFC compared with the WRRC gardens, although there are of course some exceptions to this as a few participants indicated principally valuing tranquility and isolation. Although the case study organizations deal with different communities and different sized populations, it nevertheless seems probable that part of the stronger community in the LCFC garden relates to the decision to have individual plots alongside a communal plot, which a number of participants explicitly identified as a key motivating subject (an issue I will return to in the following section). It was clear to me that the skill and labour of the horticultural technicians contributed somewhat to the productivity of the WRRC gardens, but I found it difficult to assess the degree to which their involvement encouraged (by enhancing production and improving the aesthetic of the garden) or crowded out participation (by making it seem like necessary tasks would be completed otherwise).

Another prominent finding from my research is that gardeners tend to perceive several significant health impacts on an individual level beyond the food itself, such as valuing the
increase in physical activity participants got from going to the garden regularly, especially for senior citizens, and the mental health benefits from being outdoors and from socializing in these spaces, points that again resonate with major themes in the literature on community gardens (Marsh et al., 2018; Pollard et al., 2018; Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017). Active gardeners regularly described the fact that going to the garden was an activity that improved their mood. Some of this resulted from personal interactions, as people expressed benefitting from new friendships and the chance to meet new people who they normally would not otherwise interact with. For some, positive associations were more connected to feelings of accomplishment and empowerment that came from seeing the physical results of one’s labour and from improved self-sufficiency. Many participants also indicated benefitting from the sense of tranquility and connection to nature they got while tending to the gardens, which brought peace and relaxation.

The community gardeners I spoke with consistently described a strong sense of place attachment, a concept that is used by human geographers to denote a positive correlation or bond between an individual and a specific place, which can also relate to the fact that specific places can significantly influence individuals’ states of mental well-being (Korpela, 2012). Place attachment can also relate to the social relationships and activities that typically occur within a place as well as its natural or built environment, including its sights, sounds, smells, and general aesthetic (Korpela, 2012). The community gardeners interviewed in this study attached meaning to these places and explained how they impacted their mental health in a positive way, consistently describing their fondness of the gardens and that gardening made them feel better physically or emotionally, or both. While this might seem to be very straightforward, it is important to consider whether or not there is a causal relationship between community gardening and the perception of positive health outcomes, because people who choose to get engaged in
gardening may be more inclined to seek out healthier lifestyles in the first place or attribute benefits to their involvement. It is also important to note that perceptions of health benefits and healthy lifestyles are subjective, and definitions of “health” will vary between participants.

In both case study sites, the key informants were well aware of the disjuncture between the fact that there are clear benefits to gardening for the communities and yet it can be hard for people to recognize this before they get engaged. In spite of these limitations and the considerable effort for getting more people involved in gardening, as a key informant at the LCFC put it, there was a very clear sense that the community garden has already enhanced the “community building” the organization seeks to inspire, and a clear recognition that “it adds to the general well-being” of both the individuals and the LCFC as a whole. The experiences of the WRRC and the LCFC provide a clear indication that food banks and food centers can benefit from creating community gardening programs.

5.2. Directions for Future Research and Applied Recommendations

While community gardening is often perceived as a middle-class endeavour, the literature on community gardening frequently discusses their value in relation to marginalized communities. For instance, Al-Delaimy and Webb (2017) examined the role of community gardens in a low-income community with high rates of noncommunicable diseases in Flint, Michigan. Wakefield et al. (2007) examined community garden users in Regent Park, Toronto, which is a neighbourhood with Canada’s oldest and largest social housing complex (though it has been in the process of major gentrification since around the time of the study). Sanchez and Liamputtong (2017) examined the value of community gardens in a town in rural Victoria, Australia where access to healthcare is limited. Lanier et al. (2015) assessed community gardens that partnered with non-profits to address obesity and non-communicable diseases. Mmako et al.
(2019) and Marsh et al. (2018) both examined the role of community gardeners among members of social housing projects in Australia.

As indicated at the outset of this thesis, the main difference between the existing literature and this study is that this study focused on gardens where there is a direct relationship to food banks or food centers. I believe, and I hope that this thesis has demonstrated, that this relationship is an important one that should be fostered, and to this end I hope this thesis helps to fill and adds to scholarly knowledge. In light of the small sample size, my limited success enrolling non-gardening participants, and the time constraints of this study, I see this as more of an exploratory study, which I hope might provide a steppingstone for future research into the linkages between community gardens, food banks, and food centers.

There are a number of areas of future research that could be explored more in-depth that I wish could have attended to. At the end of my research, my biggest regret was that I did not focus more attention on the gender dynamics within the spaces of community gardening, but the significance of this did not fully dawn on me until the research process was well underway. The nature of my case study sites entailed different gender dynamics at the community gardens, and I think it could have been a valuable line of inquiry to learn about whether gender affects the atmosphere of these spaces or not, and why. Because the WRRC is a service for women who are facing violence and crisis, I only interviewed female participants there, and there is minimal male presence at the gardens (only in the form of some of the support from horticultural technicians). As indicated in Chapter 3, there were times when I felt vulnerable as a female researcher, and while some of the participants I interviewed spoke to the therapeutic role of the gardens in different ways, I came to wonder about their sense of security in those spaces (especially at the Meridian garden) and to what extent it limited the participation of the WRRC
population in gardening, especially since one participant indicated that she did not feel safe being alone in the garden given what she has endured. However, I was reluctant to dig into the sorts of trauma the gardeners and the food cupboard users who did not garden endured (and which had not been identified in my NMREB proposal), and whether it adversely affected their perceptions of gardening, but I think it would be possible for a female researcher who is sensitive to the mental health impacts of trauma to examine these issues in a research project. At the LCFC, community gardeners and food service users were made up of both males and females, and while some gardeners were coming from contexts of poverty and others were not, there is not a comparable level of trauma that is carried to the LCFC community garden. In general, the LCFC garden is a more lively, social environment, and in my experience, the LCFC garden was a highly equitable space, where people socialized easily across ages and genders and were very receptive of advice from whoever was most knowledgeable. While these social dynamics and the lively social environment undoubtedly mitigated some of the gendered risks to some degree, occasionally I did still wonder about safety issues in that space and I believe this could also be explored further, as well as gaining insights into risk avoidance strategies, individually or at the level of the garden community.

Another significant direction for future research that emerged relates to a limitation in my group of participants that I have noted at a few different points: the fact that I only spoke to a small number of people who use the WRRC’s and the LCFC’s food services but do not garden. Finding a way to access a greater segment of this population could help to better understand the gap between the fact that many more people could seemingly benefit from getting involved in gardening than were presently engaged. Perhaps this could involve a targeted call for people who might be willing to garden but had not yet taken the first step. One mechanism that I believe
could serve to increase participation in the WRRC gardens would be to dedicate some share of each garden space to individual plots, as opposed to solely having two large communal plots. A number of gardeners at both case study sites suggested that individual plots can serve to build the level of participation and thereby the sense of community in community gardens. If the WRRC were to consider doing this, however, it could mean reducing the involvement of the municipal horticultural technicians at the Meridian garden to some degree.

Although the WRRC and the LCFC have very different institutional mandates, I believe that some of the sorts of food literacy programming that go on at the LCFC (e.g. cooking and canning workshops) could be a great benefit to people who rely on the WRRC, and could serve to not only increase the use of fresh produce from the gardens that appear in the food cupboard, but also help to spur more engagement in the garden from food cupboard users. The importance of the LCFC’s Garden Educator was also very evident to me, and if the WRRC sees the value in increasing garden participation among its users it should consider pursuing a grant to hire for a similar position in the future.

In both case study sites, the gardens themselves are on good quality soil, well-supplied with water, and have an aesthetic that is pleasing to the users, but having the locations of the gardens 1-2 kilometers away from the buildings of the organizations is not ideal, and likely reduces participation to some extent. For a few of the WRRC participants, this was flagged as one of the most significant barriers to participation in the gardens, and it may have impeded some of the users of the LCFC’s community meals or cooking programs from having a look at the garden. While neither organization has the institutional capacity to provide transportation to people using the gardens on a regular basis, it might be possible to coordinate carpooling to assist people who have indicated this need. But the bigger lesson regarding distance is that if
food banks or food centers do intend to build a community gardening program for their regular
users, they should try to target land as close to their location as possible, and one line of research
that could support this would be to identify vacant, usable, municipal land that is close to
established food banks. The LCFC is fortunate to have an on-site greenhouse, which allows them
to start seedlings in the colder months, facilitate garden workshops during the winter, and grow a
small supply of vegetables and herbs. The WRRC benefits from its community partnerships, not
only with Meridian and the OPP station, but also local garden centers who donate seedlings,
seeds, mulch, and other gardening supplies every year, and food banks and food centers also
frequently have a range of community partnerships that they can potentially draw from if they
are to build gardening programs.

Ultimately, the people working and volunteering at the WRRC and the LCFC believe that
everyone has the right to good, healthy food, are deeply conscious of the systemic inequities
perpetuating food insecurity among their community of users, and know that community gardens
are not going to fix all of the problems that force low-income people to depend heavily on
unhealthy foods. They are well aware that community gardens are nothing close to a substitute
for greater federal and provincial commitments to things like poverty reduction (e.g. increased
minimum wage, basic income programs etc.), improved social services (e.g. increased social
housing), and food system transformations that would help to make fresh produce more
accessible. However, barring radically greater social investments and political economic
changes, we can expect that food banks and food centers will be needed for the foreseeable
future, and wherever possible they would do well to try to make some community garden space
available for their users. As the experiences of the WRRC and the LCFC illustrate, the
community gardens are valuable not only for the food they generate, but for a range of other
beneficial impacts they have on the gardeners. The stories shared by the community gardeners, food bank and food center users presented in this thesis shed light on a diversity of lived experiences and perspectives on food and gardening. I feel lucky that I was seen as trustworthy enough for them to share their perspectives with me, and I hope that some insights and questions raised here can be taken up by future researchers and practitioners to help expand the fledging and important relations between food banks, food centers, and community gardens.
References


challenges in garden management amid diverse geographical and organizational contexts.

*Agriculture and Human Values, 32*(2), 241-254.


community health through community gardens. *Journal of Community Practice* 23(3-4), 492-507.


considering the health, social value and happiness of home and community food gardens.

*Urban Science, 2*(4), 1-16.


Uytdewilligen, R. (2020 February 20). Number of community garden spaces growing as interest


Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide for key informants

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>PROBES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background on food security</td>
<td>- What are the first things you think of when you hear the terms “food access” or “food security”?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Have food access or food security issues surfaced in your daily work?</td>
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<td>- On average, how many food bank users does your agency receive per month?</td>
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<td>- How often are users allowed to access the food bank?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What kinds of food do you see in the food bank most often?</td>
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</table>
- Are there many healthy food options at the food bank?

- What are some of the barriers in the community for accessing healthy food?

- Do you think there are barriers to eating healthy for food bank users even if healthy food is provided?

- What current activities exist in the community that improve people’s access to healthy food?

- Who or what else could make accessing healthy food easier?

- Can you think of any existing people, organizations, things or places that could help?

- What else would you like to see helping people obtain healthy food? And how could we go about doing this?

- What does “healthy” mean to you?

---

### 2. The community garden

- What are some of the motives behind your agency’s community gardening program?

- Can you give me a brief overview of how the community garden functions?

- Could you tell me a bit about the structure of the community garden? Are the plots shared or individual?

- Do you find that food bank users are actively participating in the garden? Why or why not?

- How did it first begin? Who funds it? Whose idea was it?

- Is it supported by volunteers? Food bank users?
### 3. Conclusions

- How are tasks designated in the garden?
- Where does the food from the garden go? Who gets what food?
- Is there enough land available for the garden?
- What kinds of foods are grown in the garden?
- Are there limits to the amount of food that people can take from the garden?
- Are there any kind of supports or initiatives that your agency offers to help users find ways to use food from the garden?
- How do you think food bank users view food from the community garden?
- Are there any ways that food bank users could be more active in the community garden?
- Do you wish the community garden were different in any way?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?
Appendix B: Interview guide for food bank and food center users and community gardeners

---

**Preamble:**
Hello, my name is Sydney Phillips, I am Master’s student in the Department of Geography at Western University, Canada. This study seeks to better understand the nature of community gardens and their impact on food security for individuals who use food banks in southwestern Ontario.

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<tr>
<th>Informed consent obtained (Please circle)</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<td>(do not proceed without informed consent)</td>
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6. Date:  
7. Name of interviewer:  
8. Study region:  
9. Pseudonym of the participant:  
10. Age of participant:  
11. Gender of participant:  
12. Were you born in Canada?:  
13. If not, in which continent were you born?:  
14. Have you used a food bank within the last month?:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>PROBES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Can you tell me a bit about what your food security situation has been like in the past year?</td>
<td>- Why is that?</td>
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<td>- Where do you mostly get your food from?</td>
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<td>- How often do you use a food bank?</td>
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<td>- What kinds of food do you collect from the food bank?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Do you have access to many healthy food options at the food bank?</td>
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<td>- Are there any foods that you wish you could consume more of?</td>
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<td>- Do you know how to prepare your own meals, or, do you have access to a kitchen to prepare your own meals?</td>
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<td>- What kinds of challenges do you face in order to provide food for yourself and your family?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Are there barriers to eating healthy for you even if the healthy food is provided?</td>
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| - The food bank? The grocery store? Convenience stores? The dollar store? |
| - As often as they allow you to? Monthly? Weekly? |
| - Is this your preferred type of food to consume? |
| - Does someone else in your household prepare the meals? |
| - Financial? Social? Domestic abuse? Racism, sexism, or ableism? |
| - Time constraints? Energy budgets/constraints? Lack of cooking skills? |

| 2. Involvement in the community garden |
| - How did you get involved in the community garden, or, how did you find out about it? |
| - Were you on a wait list to gain access to the garden? |
| - Did you have gardening skills before? |
| - If not, what new gardening skills have you learned? |
| - Can you tell me a little bit about how the community garden functions? |

<p>| - Through friends? A social organization? The food bank? |
| - Is it free access to everyone? |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Possible benefits of the community garden</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Are the plots in the garden shared or individual? Which model do you prefer?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is there enough land for you to use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How has the community garden impacted your food intake?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How has it impacted what you eat?</td>
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<td>- What kinds of food do you grow and collect from the garden?</td>
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<td>- How often do you visit the garden?</td>
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<td>- What tasks do you complete in the garden?</td>
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<td>- How has the community garden impacted your physical health?</td>
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<td>- Your mental health?</td>
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<td>- Does working in the garden give you self-confidence or empowerment?</td>
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<td>- Are there any programs offered through the food bank that teach you how to prepare food from the garden?</td>
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<tr>
<th>4. Possible limitations of the community garden</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Are the plots in the garden shared or individual? Which model do you prefer?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is there enough land for you to use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Who works in it? Volunteers, food bank users, employees?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Would there be more incentive to garden if the plots were individual?</td>
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<td>- Are you eating more now?</td>
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<td>- Are you eating healthier now?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Weeding, watering, harvesting, leisure?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- More exercise? Has your weight changed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Are you happy in the garden? Does it relax you? Have you created new relationships?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is it a long walk? Can you drive to it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Can you take any food when you need it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How do you utilize food from the community garden?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Are you able to can/preserve the food for the winter?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is finding recipes to utilize food from the garden difficult?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Do you feel safe in the community garden?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is working in the garden stressful in any way?</td>
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<td>- Do you wish the community garden was different in any way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Overall, are you grateful that you are involved in the community garden?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience with the community garden?</td>
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</table>
Appendix C: Letter of Information and Interview Consent Form

CAN COMMUNITY GARDENS IMPROVE FOOD BANKS AND FOOD CENTERS? 
LESSONS FROM TWO SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO CASES

Principal Investigator: Dr. Anthony Weis  
Co-investigator: Sydney Phillips  
Western University, London ON  
Western University, London ON

Invitation to participate in in-depth interviews

My name is Sydney Phillips, and I am part of the Department of Geography at Western University. I am conducting a study to find out about food insecurity and community gardens in your region. I am inviting you to participate in a face-to-face interview for this study as a part of my Master’s thesis research, lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research. The aim of this research is to understand how community gardens impact access to healthy food in your community.

Participation in the study is minimal risk and should not exceed that involved in your daily life. If you would like to discuss any risks you perceive to be associated with your possible participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact the researchers at the contact information listed above. There are no direct benefits to you. This study may have societal benefits in providing a better understanding of the nature of food insecurity and potentially informing policies and programs which address this issue.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no compensation for participating in this study. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study. Answering these questions means that you have agreed to participate in the study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. You do not waive any legal right by providing your written consent. No new information will be collected without your permission.

Audio-recording of this interview is optional, and you may participate even if you do not wish to be audio-recorded. All data collected over the course of this study will remain confidential and accessible only to the Principal Investigator and Co-investigator. If you wish for your information to be withdrawn from the study at any time, please contact the Principal Investigator. Recordings will be transferred into an external drive that is password protected. The only identifiable data collected will be the first and last names of the participant. Data from this study may be made available to academic journals or other researchers for re-analysis for different research. The type of information that will be shared from this study will include direct quotations from in-depth interviews and focus groups. Participant names will not be shared outside of this study. Participants will only be identified by a unique code in the study results. There will be a list linking unique codes to identifiers that is only accessible to the Principal
Researcher. If the results are published, any personal identifiers (i.e. name) will not be used. All personal information collected for the study will be kept confidential and stored in a password protected computer. The information collected will be used for the purposes of the study only and all data will be encrypted and stored for a maximum of 7 years, after which they will be permanently deleted. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. No other agency will have access to this information.

Questions and concerns should be directed to the Principal Investigator at the contact information listed above. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Office of Human Research Ethics, Western University at 519-661-3036 or ethics@uwo.ca.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

CAN COMMUNITY GARDENS IMPROVE FOOD BANKS AND FOOD CENTERS? LESSONS FROM TWO SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO CASES

Principal Investigator: Co-investigator:
Dr. Anthony Weis Sydney Phillips
Western University, London ON Western University, London ON

1. Written consent form

Do you confirm that the Letter of Information has been read to you and have had all questions answered to your satisfaction?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you agree to participate in this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Are you 18 years or older?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you consent to the use of audio recording during this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Participant Name (full) _______________ Participant Signature _______________
Date __________

"My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions."

Researcher’s Name (full) ________________ Researcher’s Signature ________________

Date __________
Appendix D: Ethics Approval

Date: 17 May 2019

To: Tony Weis

Project ID: 113703

Study Title: Addressing Food Insecurity and Malnutrition in Southwestern Ontario with Community Gardens

Short Title: Community Food Gardens in Southwestern Ontario

Application Type: NMRERB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: June 7 2019

Date Approval Issued: 17 May 2019

REB Approval Expiry Date: 17 May 2020

Dear Tony Weis

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMRERB) has reviewed and approved the WREb application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMRERB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMRERB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Name</th>
<th>Document Type</th>
<th>Document Date</th>
<th>Document Version</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group consent form - non tracked</td>
<td>Written Consent/Assent</td>
<td>17 May 2019</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group questions updated</td>
<td>Focus Group(s) Guide</td>
<td>20 Apr 2019</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeepers Announcement - food bank users</td>
<td>Recruitment Materials</td>
<td>18 Apr 2019</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gatekeepers Announcement - service providers</td>
<td>Recruitment Materials</td>
<td>18 Apr 2019</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview consent form - non tracked</td>
<td>Written Consent/Assent</td>
<td>17 May 2019</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview questions - service providers</td>
<td>Interview Guide</td>
<td>20 Apr 2019</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview questions updated - food bank users</td>
<td>Interview Guide</td>
<td>20 Apr 2019</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMRERB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMRERB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMRERB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMRERB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Crabbe, NMRERB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).
Curriculum Vitae

Education

Western University
MA, Geography
London, ON
2018 – 2020

King’s University College at Western University
BA, Honors Specialization in Social Justice and Peace studies
London, ON
2014 – 2018

Professional Experience

Western University
Teaching Assistant
September 2018 – April 2020
• Marking all assignments and exams for undergraduate students, proctoring exams, uploading grades, and answering questions for students

Women’s Rural Resource Centre
Food Program Support
Strathroy, ON
June 2018 – August 2018
• Provided support to women by facilitating food bank donations, cooking for the residents, and running the community gardening program

Service and Affiliations

• Volunteer, Food Support Services at Western University (September 2019 to March 2020)
• Volunteer, The Women’s Rural Resource Centre, Strathroy, Ontario (August 2018 to August 2019)
• Volunteer, The Local Community Food Centre, Stratford, Ontario (May 2019 to August 2019)
• Coordinator, United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, King’s University College (January 2017)
• President, Social Justice and Peace club (September 2016 to April 2017)
• Volunteer, My Sister’s Place of the Canadian Mental Health Association (July 2016 to October 2016)
• Unpaid Intern, ReForest London (October 2015 to February 2016)
• Member, Social Justice and Peace club (September 2014 to April 2016)

Honors and Awards

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canadian Graduate Scholarship 2018 – 2019
Angus McKenzie Community Service Award 2018
King’s University College Continuing Scholarship 2017 – 2018
King’s University College Dean’s Honor List 2017 – 2018
King’s Scholar Nominee 2017
Dr. Joan Mason-Grant Award for Experiential Learning 2017
Angus McKenzie Community Service Award 2017
King’s University College Continuing Scholarship 2016 – 2017
King’s University College Dean’s Honor List 2016 – 2019
King’s University College Dean’s Honor List 2015 – 2016
King’s University College Entrance Scholarship 2014

Published Works

• “Women in Fieldwork: ‘Just Do It’”. Podcast published by the Royal Society of Canada, Voices of the RSC (April 2019)
• “‘SheTrades’: An E-Commerce Initiative to Tackle Trade Barriers for Women in Least-Developed Countries.” Field note published by King’s University College Undergraduate Research Journal (February 2018)

International Research and Study