

Current Community Needs and Potential Response Strategies at Huerta del Valle - Ontario



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Introduction

In the heart of Southern California's valleys lies a beautiful place: the Inland Empire. One might not think it is beautiful -- growing up in Los Angeles, I used to be turned off by the region's warehouses and polluting industry. I did not love this place until about a year after I moved here to attend Pitzer College when I participated in my first ever community-based course in the City of Ontario. I soon learned that although the physical environment is an acquired taste, the people here are what make the Inland Empire live and breathe beauty.

This semester I was fortunate enough to participate in Critical Action and Social Advocacy (CASA) Pitzer, a community change and area studies program in which each student partnered up with a local organization. My community partner was Huerta del Valle, an Ontario-based nonprofit that develops community gardens and urban farms throughout the Inland Empire as local solutions to food deserts and climate change. I enjoyed my time working with Huerta del Valle and will always hold this experience close to my heart.



Nopales (cacti) and flowers at the west end of Huerta del Valle - Ontario's urban farm.

For this program, I had to do a qualitative research project with my community partner. Research already exists on the food justice movement and the benefits of community gardens;

some research out of the Claremont Colleges even focuses on Huerta del Valle - Ontario itself. This semester, the organization wanted to know how it could better serve its community members. In the past, Huerta del Valle has addressed some big issues in local residents' lives. Even its mere existence improves local access to healthy, affordable food. But even when some injustices are solved, oppression manages to manifest itself in different forms. For this reason, **my research topic investigates current community needs of the Huerta del Valle - Ontario community, and suggests strategies to address these issues.** The main questions of this study are:

What challenges are members of the Huerta-Ontario community currently facing? How can Huerta del Valle - Ontario respond to these challenges?

Using qualitative research methods alongside María Alonso, the founder and director of Huerta del Valle, we spoke with multiple community members and used community-engaged, participatory-action, and environmental justice ideologies and research approaches to produce this project. It happens that, among other things, community members face challenges in access to healthcare, fear about migration statuses, and desire more community members and volunteer presence in the garden. I close by briefly suggesting improved communication strategies and increased collaboration among local schools and grassroots organizations to improve upon these issues.

Autobiography, Positionality, & Intentionality

Before diving into the research, I must address myself and my own positionality that undoubtedly affects my approach to and interpretations of this work. I am a 20-year-old biracial White-Latina undergraduate student from an affluent family and neighborhood in the Los Angeles area. I went to Glendale public schools up until college, in which I currently study Environmental Analysis and Spanish at Pitzer College. Within environmental studies, my passions include sustainable transportation and city planning, local climate solutions, and community engagement. In terms of research, I admire environmental justice, community-based, participatory-action, critical race theory, and intersectional qualitative approaches.

I chose to work with Huerta del Valle this semester because I already knew María through a different Pitzer community-engagement course, and wanted to participate in the reclaiming of land from colonial structures. Before this semester, I had little experience working in community gardens; I had only briefly worked in one while studying abroad in Quito, Ecuador. It became very clear to me that Huerta del Valle is a special place, and that it was essential for me as an Angelena (someone from Los Angeles) to understand and highlight the Inland Empire's significance. I was wary about entering a community in which I did not belong, and I felt that many community members were (rightfully) wary of me; my observations and focus group reflect that hesitance.

Some of my identities connect with those of members of the Huerta-Ontario community, while many others of mine do not. I am a second-gen Latina of Mexican descent from Southern California. I speak Spanish. In the same vein that Andrea Ritchie (2017) includes her identity and intention in her work, I would like to be able to include my subjectivity in this paper. Although some aspects of myself connect with those of many folks at Huerta-Ontario, many

parts of me do not; I am also white, upper middle class, born in the U.S., and currently receiving a college education. In terms of these identities, I'd like to follow Price's (2015) lead in becoming an ally to the Huerta community and be motivated by the following concept:

“As Lila Watson and her Aboriginal activist group warned, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (cited in Peterson, p.21).

My intention by partnering with CASA Pitzer and Huerta del Valle is to learn more about environmental action and to help out the organization however I can. I'd like to do research with the community in a way that will benefit everyone in the community, and I'm still learning how to do that. I hope that the outsider's perspective in this research will bring to light new issues, or reframe old ones, in a way that is helpful to the organization and its community members.



Setting: The Inland Empire and Huerta del Valle

Before beginning discussions of the research, it is important to establish an understanding of the setting in which it takes place. The Inland Empire (IE), sitting 40 miles east of the City of Los Angeles, is one of California's economic powerhouses. It lies more inland than the city; it is hotter, dryer, and has some of the worst air quality in the country. To an outsider, the IE was a dusty space devoid of human life, instead filled with widespread malls and identical rows of housing. Freight railroads (that my first-generation Mexican family members built, as my dad always reminds me) traverse the area, and the westbound freeways are clogged in the mornings as Inland Empire residents commute to LA for work.

Upon second look, it is clear that the Inland Empire's colonial history still shapes its current conditions. The current cities of this region stand on indigenous Tongva land, stolen by colonial settlers and much of it soon industrialized (see de Lara, 2018). Dominant racial power relations from the past are still prevalent, both within cities and between cities within the IE. An interaction with an Uber driver from Rancho Cucamonga perfectly illustrates these dynamics:

[Another intern and I] shared an Uber to Huerta del Valle. Our driver was a white man from Rancho Cucamonga. Rancho is a wealthier city in the foothills along the 210 freeway, still bearing its colonial name. He asked,

“Where are you going?”

“A community garden in Ontario.”

“Really? A garden? In Ontario? Are you sure?”

“...Yes. I've been there before”

(silence)

“In... Ontario?”

“Yes...”

I finally clarified that Huerta was a garden focused on providing healthy food to local low-income families. “Ohhhh,” he exclaimed. “It all makes sense now.” (Brown, field notes)

The City of Ontario is home to many Latinx immigrants and first-generation children, many of Mexican origin. Whether intentional or not, the driver implied that a city of brown people could not have a beautiful community garden. Injustice is a strong undertone of the Inland Empire;

warehouses take advantage of low-income workers, workers of color and undocumented folks, while people of color are disproportionately incarcerated in prisons and immigration detention centers.

On top of that, many cities in the IE with large populations of low-income people of color are food deserts. This means that healthy food is inaccessible either because it is too expensive or there is simply not enough. Many neighborhoods of the City of Ontario in San Bernardino County are considered food deserts, and my community partner Huerta del Valle formed as a response to this issue and as a local climate solution. María Alonso, an Ontario resident originally from Michoacán, México and Arthur Levine, a student at Pitzer College at the time, teamed up to create a community garden in the heart of Ontario. For María, it was a way for accessing healthy food to help with her family's health; for Arthur, it was a local solution to climate change and a new organizing space. The community garden was named *Huerta del Valle* (directly translating to “produce farm of the valley” in Spanish) and has since become a beacon of organizing within local Latinx, low-income, and immigrant communities.

The Ontario community garden provides inexpensive plots for local families to grow their own food, sells organic produce for \$1 per pound to the community, and runs various community workshops. In addition to tackling the food desert it sits in, Huerta-Ontario is also a local solution to climate change. The garden sequesters carbon from the air, slightly decreasing the amount of carbon dioxide released from motor vehicles and industrial activity in the region. Huerta del Valle has since become an Ontario-based nonprofit focused on developing more community gardens and urban farms in the IE:

“We envision one garden every mile in our region. We envision a city where all people can eat delicious, nutritious, fresh, local, sustainably produced and just food through farming, healthy food access, nutrition education, sustainable production and distribution, and economic development addressing complex regional health issues” (Huerta del Valle, n.d.)

Our mission is to cultivate an organization of community members to grow our own organic crops. Through growing our food we work toward sustainable community empowerment and health: creating meaningful work, building lasting skills and developing strong relationships within the region. "Growing change in the Inland Valley." (Huerta del Valle, n.d.)

In my experience of growing up in and around Los Angeles, I have noticed that the IE is sidelined in the regional media to my own city and to Orange County (Straight, 2011). The region and its people lack visibility among those outside of it, and academia also fails to sufficiently represent them in research. It is a research desert on top of a food desert.

Community-engaged and qualitative research can be used to make visible the ways that Huerta del Valle empowers people whom hegemony does not want to be empowered. This visibility is especially important as the non-profit tries to establish new gardens throughout the IE, as it could bring in more support from institutions with financial resources. For these reasons, research with this particular organization in the Inland Empire is valuable. Furthermore, race and power relations and land use issues in the IE run deep across time (see de Lara, 2018), and critical research of the region with a framework of these issues could serve to upset these dominant powers and therefore be valuable to continually oppressed communities.

Current academic literature provides a strong foundation for this project in the topics of food justice and community garden benefits and community building, while research from the Claremont Colleges explicitly discusses Huerta del Valle's beginnings and benefits to the Ontario community.

Literature Review: Food Justice & Community Gardens

According to *Cultivating Food Justice* (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011), a variety of food movements in the past thirty years have created a strong opposition to industrial crop monocultures; however, with their focus on simply shifting purchasing power to local foods, many of these movements have become dominated by middle-class and white folks while excluding those that find it difficult to even access food. Many communities of color, like Huerta-Ontario, have made efforts to reclaim land and health in places where discriminatory planning has barred many people from accessing nutritious and affordable food. They are cultivating an intersectional food movement called food justice, or food justice activism. When examined through a critical race theory and environmental justice lens, food justice can be defined as “communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals” (cited in Alkon & Agyeman, p. 5).

Multiple studies conclude that structural racism and food insecurity (not knowing where your next meal will come from) are linked, confirming the need for food justice movements. Since the latter half of the 20th century, one study finds that supermarkets have followed the various white flights from cities to the suburbs, leaving many communities of color with less healthy food options (Eisenhauer, 2001). To add onto that, food insecurity among Black and Latinx folks in the United States has hovered between 14% and 27% of all households from 2001 to 2016, while food insecurity among Asian and White households stuck between 7% and 15% (Odoms-Young et. al., 2018). Food insecurity has been linked to preventable lifestyle health issues such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes (Eisenhauer, 2001; Adams, et. al., 2003). A 2018 study (Odoms-Young, et. al.) suggests that nutrition programs and taxes be used as

solutions. These would be great support to food insecure communities of color, but there is also the more immediate hope of community gardens.

Huerta del Valle is not the only community garden that formed as a solution to food inaccessibility. Community gardens have, in fact, recently been proliferating in the United States due to peoples' desire to live more sustainably, reconnect with food, and create community in addition to providing accessible, healthy food (Firth, et. al.). Recent studies undertaken at various community garden sites in the United States also agree on their many health and social benefits to participants. In one rural Oregon study (Carney, et. al.), low-income migrant Latinx families saw a three- to four-fold increase in vegetable consumption and strengthened familial and community connections while working in the garden. Working class families utilizing community gardens in San José and Silicon Valley in another study were able to save hundreds of dollars per month and avoid diabetes with access to fresh, affordable produce (Gray, et. al.). Multiple studies of community garden benefits have found that they can be spaces for networking, creating community connections, and for cultivating cultural identity (Flachs, 2010; Firth, Carney, Gray). The benefits of community gardens to those that frequent them are undeniable; what mainstream academic research is missing on this topic, however, are studies of community gardens located in the Inland Empire or the City of Ontario.

Mainstream academic scholarship about the Inland Empire and the land that is now the City of Ontario leaves much to be desired; existing sources piece together a story of Tongva land undergoing colonial and capitalist development. Soon after becoming incorporated into the United States from Mexican control in the late nineteenth century, a citrus-based agricultural economy was established (de Lara, 2018). The City of Ontario became an “agriburb,” an urbanized suburb of Los Angeles with a focus on agriculture for profit (Sandul, 2010). The

industrial focus on agriculture in this time period embodied white patriarchal manifest destiny during the “golden age” of capitalism, in that the agricultural labor force was majorly Mexican, Chicana and Asian people while white people held on to wealth (de Lara, 2018). De Lara’s book, *Inland Shift*, focuses heavily on the racialization of people in the Inland Empire economy, describing how those race relations continued through the industrialization of this space and the privatization of land. It supports the (widely accepted among southern Californians-) idea that white people disproportionately wield political power in a place with many people of color. The mainstream academic scholarship that exists on Ontario and the Inland Empire as a place sets a historical foundation for further analyses of current social issues in the area. Although helpful to understanding the current social inequalities in the area, current academic research majorly fails to address the conditions location component that this paper will attempt to address: community gardens as a solution to food deserts in the Inland Empire.

While professional research is generally seen as superior to undergraduate research, existing graduate, doctorate, and postdoctoral research on food deserts in the Inland Empire pales in comparison to the research on the topic produced by students at the Claremont Colleges. An Environmental Analysis senior thesis by a Pomona College student (McCoy, 2011) mapped out the City of Ontario using Geographic Information Systems and was able to identify multiple food deserts in the area down to the city block. According to a GIS map, the neighborhood in which Huerta del Valle now stands can certainly constitute a food desert -- although it is within a 10 to 15 minute walk or drive of multiple grocery stores, the healthy produce sold there is too expensive for many of the neighborhood’s residents (McCoy, 2011).

The authors of other pieces out of the Claremont Colleges (see Hochberg, 2014; Reyff, 2016; Serafin, 2019) largely agree that local structural inequalities create the need for

environmental justice, especially for Latinx people and other people of color, in Ontario. Affluent white people have continually secured relatively clean space in Los Angeles, pushing people of color to the east into the industrialized, warehouse-full Inland Empire (Serafin, 2019). Colonial racial and structural inequalities inform current local politics and the city's land ownership today (Reyff, 2016). Huerta del Valle is one of the first community garden nonprofits of its kind in Ontario (Reyff, 2016, p. 54), and is currently trailblazing community garden efforts in the Inland Empire.

These many sources set the stage upon which this project takes place. The primary goal of this paper is to help the organization improve the lives of its members, not necessarily to add to the established knowledge of Huerta del Valle. Its longer standing contribution to academia, however, is the concept of using CASA Pitzer research projects to continually evaluate community needs, and continue reporting this information back to Huerta del Valle.

Methodology

In this research paper, I use qualitative research methods to evaluate the current needs of the Huerta-Ontario community, and to report on the major social, financial, health, and environmental issues faced by the community. With this information, Huerta del Valle - Ontario will be more able to tailor its programs towards the needs of its community members.

Research Approach

This is the ideology that a researcher applies when shaping a research project. How do we shape the questions to ask? How do we figure out what is important in our data? Different research approaches to the same project can produce very different results; for that reason, I would like to briefly discuss my research approaches and inspirations. This project is a participatory-action ethnography, meaning that its conclusions are derived from experiences at Huerta-Ontario, my observations as a researcher, and previous knowledge around the topic. The results are not necessarily meant to be reproducible or applicable to any other situation, as other types of research would be.

An approach that inspired me is Tessa's creation, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD):

The ABCD model posits that traditional methods of assessing marginalized communities are inherently flawed because of the inclination to focus on problems, deficits, and needs rather than on assets, strengths, and capacities. This former model leads to deficit-oriented service- providing models that promote temporary social services as solutions to community problems, instead of developing asset-building movements that are mobilized from the inside-out and generate long-term change. [...] An ABCD approach shifts this paradigm by recognizing the skills and abilities that exist within communities, connecting them to definitive needs, and ensuring that community members and groups design and execute agendas for change. (Peterson, 2018, p. 36)

My research questions have the potential to turn out negative and deficit-based results; however, I want to weave in the assets and resources that Huerta-Ontario already has into this narrative. For this reason, I will focus on benefits the garden has already provided to community members. As a potential response

strategy to community challenges, I will suggest ways in which Huerta can use its resources differently to meet folks' needs.

Si tuvieras una varita mágica, qué harías con tres deseos?
(If you had a magic lamp, what three wishes would you make?)
-María Alonso

This is how María, who I admire so deeply, began Huerta's community forums this semester. This reminds me of another approach that inspires me -- futurism and hope (see brown, 2017). By prefacing discussions with asking folks what they would do if they could do anything, or what they would have if they could have anything, puts dreams at the forefront of conversations about change. It places dreams, although unrealistic at times, at the front of what we want, and causes us to walk towards them. I ask these questions as a researcher in order to hopefully push Huerta del Valle towards the dreams of its community members.

Research Methods

To gather data for this paper, I first began by writing my observations during my work with Huerta del Valle in the form of field notes. Acting as a participant researcher, I wrote about my doings and interactions at the internship while immersing myself in the community and doing my best to support the organization. Because I did not know my research topic at the start of the semester, I did not write down my observations with any specific topics in mind. I did, however, see my interactions through a lens of race relations, place, and environmental justice. I believe that this impacts what I chose as important in my later research.

In September, we held a community forum with Huerta-Ontario community members to gain a sense of their needs and feedback for the organization. The ideas from this discussion shaped some of the results for this research. Twenty-three community members also took short-answer survey after the forum. I use this data in this study as well. The survey questions were:

1. Which of the themes that we discussed today is the most important thing that we need to tackle?
Why is it important?
2. What resources does your community lack?
3. Personally, what would help you improve the quality of your life?
4. Personally, what resources would help you live a healthier life?

The data gained from these surveys helped me to develop my focus group guide. I held one focus group with three community members highly involved in Huerta-Ontario to further discuss their needs, the community's needs, and the challenges that Huerta-Ontario was facing. The focus group guiding questions were:

Icebreaker activity: If you had a magic lamp, what three wishes would you make?

1. What problems or difficulties do you have in your lives? They can be social problems, financial problems, health problems, or any other thing.
2. Which problems or difficulties do you believe are the most difficult for the community *right now*?
3. What are your needs in your life? What do you believe the needs of the members of Huerta are?
4. How has Huerta solved past problems in your lives? What has worked, and what hasn't worked?
5. What strategies do you believe Huerta can implement to improve your lives right now? Do you have some idea of organizational changes, programs that could be offered, ...?
6. What is your ideal world? What do you imagine for a perfect world in the future?
7. How can we move forward to this ideal world?

The focus group began with an icebreaker in order to situate ourselves in what the community members would ideally want if limitations and injustices could just go away. This was intended to put us in the imaginary mindset and be more open when answering the following questions. I did not ask every single question in the focus group, but we did follow the guide's line of questioning in our discussion.

I had originally planned to have three additional in-depth interviews with more community members afterwards. However, life happens and I unfortunately could not muster the energy or time to hold the interviews; I waited too long to finish my research, and before I knew it, personal complications arose that were more pressing than school. But instead of focussing on what this research paper lacks, I would like to hone in on the wealth of information it already has: the feedback surveys from a

September community forum with Huerta-Ontario community members, my field notes observations, and the 1.5 hour long focus group.

Codes

The emergent themes upon which this study’s results are based were found through my process of coding. I looked back at my observations and re-listened to the focus group, and began to identify critical moments, ideas, and discussions. These codes emerged according to feelings I picked up from community members, my observations of spaces and personal relations, and ideas that community members discussed in the focus group or the interviews. The 16 codes that emerged were grouped into 5 overarching themes: stresses, health concerns, community connections, race and relations, and spaces and environments. The organizations and descriptions of themes and codes are listed in the table below:

Name of Themes and Underlying Codes	Description of Themes and Underlying Codes (some codes are repeats under multiple themes)	Color of Code in Data
STRESSES	This theme generalizes the specific stresses felt by community members in regards to work, finances, and immigration statuses.	Red
Work Stress	Work stress manifests itself as physical and emotional hardships on community members and those around them, and the code is used in instances of this.	Light Red
Financial Stress	Financial stress refers to situations in which income, inability to find work or healthy food, and lack of funds for health issues are mentioned.	Light Purple
Fear	The Fear code indicates moments in which community members express fear. It is closely related with the Migration Statuses code under the RACE theme.	Light Pink
HEALTH CONCERNS	The Health Concerns theme covers all instances of and allusions to physical health, mental health, nutrition and food related issues.	Light Grey
Nutrition & Food Justice	This code is used whenever food comes up in conversation or actions, and also applies to discussions of healthy eating, food	Orange

	deserts, and food justice.	
Physical Health	Any time that physical health or exercise is touched upon, this code is used.	
Mental Health	This code, predetermined as important through personal observations, applies to times in which mental health issues and lack of access to therapy is mentioned.	
COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS	The Community Connections theme emerged from my observations of familial and friendly connections, the existing school/university or community partnerships, and volunteer presence at Huerta-Ontario. These codes also indicate instances in which I saw potential for more collaboration.	
Familial Connections and Friendships	When family or friends are mentioned or interact with each other, this code is used.	
School/University and Community Partnerships	This code applies to interactions between Huerta del Valle and local schools, universities, and community partnerships. It also identifies areas of potential for new partnerships.	
(Lack of) Volunteer Presence	The Volunteer Presence code highlights volunteer activity at Huerta-Ontario or the lack thereof.	
RACE & RELATIONS	This theme emerges from a motley of codes about race relations in the Inland Empire and calling back to the many homelands of folks in Ontario.	
Cultural/Racial Roots	This code identifies instances in which cultural or racial roots come up in conversation. It includes both callbacks to other homes and allusions to cultural or racial identity.	
Race Tensions & Inequalities	The Race Tensions & Inequalities is a common code used within my observations, perhaps because I am incredibly race-conscious.	
Migration Statuses	This code is used to signify specific instances in which issues of migration statuses, or the state of being undocumented in the United States, is mentioned or alluded to. It is closely related with the Fear code under the STRESS theme.	
Immigration and Class Intersections	This fairly specific code applies to situations in which immigration and class issues are discussed as interconnected problems.	
SPACES & ENVIRONMENTS	The Spaces & Environments theme applies to mentions of certain places, environmental justice issues, or environmental concerns.	

	It is also used as a code, used to identify descriptions of certain places in field notes, the focus group, and interviews.	
Environmental Justice	This code identifies moments in which environmental justice issues occur, are alluded to, or are discussed.	
Environmental Concerns	Whenever community members express concerns about the surrounding environment or climate change, this code is used.	

Although these subsets are organized into five different themes, they are all interconnected and highly interactive with one another. For example, in my field notes especially, I often use the “Fear” code in instances where I could also use the “Migration Statuses” code; many situations in which we felt fear, that fear stemmed from undocumented people having to interact with the law in some way. I suppose that, in hindsight, the “Racial Tensions” code could also be connected with these ones. This instance of interconnected codes resulted in an entire section called “Fear Surrounding Migration Statuses.”

Emergent Themes and Analysis

A few themes emerged from the coding process, which I have sorted into discussions that fall under 1) how Huerta-Ontario already benefits the community, 2) issues that community members are currently facing, both inside and outside the garden, and 3) brief suggestions on how to respond to these needs. The emerging themes and analysis are by no means the only interpretation of the community's challenges or the only responses to these issues; they came from my data, observations, and thoughts and are therefore highly subjective. I hope that my analyses are helpful to the organization and that they do more than state the obvious.

Huerta del Valle's Benefits to the Community

Doing something physical, or chatting with somebody or... and that is beneficial as much for physical health as it is for the mind. [...] It's exciting, well, to plant a little thing, and watch it grow, and then you get to eat it. (participant x, focus group)

In my observations and focus group, many community members praised Huerta del Valle and how it already benefits its community. In its six years of existence, Huerta-Ontario has acted as a community gathering space for Mexican migrant families to connect with their culture and the land. I noticed that many consider working the land at Huerta as therapeutic, while the space gives community members access to the open outdoors and to affordable, nutritious food.

Huerta del Valle connects its participants to others, creating a sense of community and shared identity. One community member recounted:

Well, [Huerta] has served me a lot because I have met many people. And more than anything, if I distract myself, it helps me to hear that other people have problems like mine [...] The majority [of the people] have confide our problems in each other [...] many of us there have problems. (participant x, focus group)

Community members are able to form connections with each other and share about issues occurring outside of the garden. The space and work effectively becomes a therapeutic one

through community interactions. The garden also holds cultural events for the surrounding communities. This semester, I attended a few, including one for the Mexican holiday Día de Muertos:

This morning, I went to the Día de Muertos celebration at Huerta del Valle. Upon walking into the garden, I noticed an altar on the left side. Community members were welcome to put up photos of their family. I thought this was really sweet; by having one altar for everyone, it implies that everyone at Huerta is part of one big family.

I walked further in, past the first center tables where children were making *papel picado*. In the tented portion of the garden, a couple women were teaching many other adults how to make *guayaba* jam. [...] While I sat [making *papel picado*], more and more Latinx folks rolled through the entrance, many donning traditional *calavera* face painting for the holiday.

Later, I went by the oven to try the *pan de muerto*. A couple ladies, hard at work on the bread, gave me a piece. It was flavored with *guayaba* and I had never tasted any *pan de muerto* so fresh and delicious. (Brown, field notes, 2019)

The garden serves as a Latinx, Mexican space, allowing community members to celebrate their heritage that might be shunned in other places.

In addition to cultivating connections and Latinx identity, Huerta del Valle has allowed community members to make significant changes in their diet and health. Multiple community members recount how it changed their lives and food:

My life, my life did change because I truly, in my food, there is always rice, beans, [and] meat [...] Yes it was a change, we were adding vegetables that we had not before. We really did not. Sometimes we ate radishes from time to time, but they were from very far away [...] before I had nothing to do with [vegetables.] We did not eat any of that but now we do. (participant x, focus group)

This community member went on to recount that they now include fresh vegetables in all of their meals, and it tastes better than without vegetables. Another community member recalled how Huerta-Ontario changed their diet:

Personally, Huerta made a huge change because, since I began with Huerta I have been changing certain things in my diet, putting more vegetables in it [...] so here, for me, I feel happy. It really made a huge change and gave me the opportunity to make that change firmer and more concrete in my life. (participant x, focus group)

Community members also to see Huerta as a therapeutic place to congregate. As previously mentioned, the garden connects community members to each other, who then can hear each other on personal issues. In the September community forum, many participants also mentioned that even just working in the garden has therapeutic properties. Multiple people repeated the phrase “the garden is therapy.”

The garden and organization are very well-received and loved by the community. One participant in the focus group highlighted that Huerta del Valle is “constantly bringing many workshops, information, and is constantly taking opportunities to improve” (Participant X, Focus Group).

Current Challenges Faced by Community Members

Although Huerta-Ontario community members individually and collectively face a multitude of issues and may need various support, a few themes in particular stood out that I would like to highlight in this section. Those themes are health and health access issues and fear surrounding migration statuses. In both the community forum and focus group, community members expressed concerns about their mental health issues and the need for therapy. The focus group also specifically discussed the prevalence of diabetes and the difficulty of accessing medical care in Ontario. Although not much was explicitly said in either the community forum or focus group about the topic, I noticed much underlying fear in my interactions with community members. For the migration status section, I rely heavily on my own observations and experiences in the discussion in order to protect peoples’ identities while also bringing this issue to light. Under the subsection titled “Other,” I discuss other concerns that were not as prevalent

across the data: desire for more feelings of community, financial needs, and general concern for local homeless populations.

Health and Health Access Issues

It became clear to me early on, in the September community forum with Huerta-Ontario folks, that many community members were challenged by the access to health resources in the area. In the community forum, the most discussed subject was mental health. When asked what the community needed, participants spent the majority of the time discussing mental health issues. According to folks in the forum, mental health issues have become more prevalent in the community, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to access professional help. In the outtake surveys, eight of the twenty-three people surveyed wrote that mental health, therapy, and a psychologist was the most important topic that was discussed in the forum. In total, ten people wrote about this theme in their survey, expressing the need for free therapy, a psychologist or therapist for Huerta, free mental health centers, and more resources for managing stress (community forum surveys, 2019).

Huerta-Ontario community members, both in the forum and focus group, communicated the need for better nutrition. One focus group participant stated that “we don’t know how to eat. That is the reality” (participant x, focus group) in reference to diet and diabetes. In fact, focus group participants suggested that Huerta provide more information and guidelines on how people should eat healthily. Nine of the twenty-three people surveyed in September also mentioned wanting to eat healthier and have nutrition classes (community forum surveys, 2019). Huerta del Valle does offer a nutrition course, but it seemed that community members either did not know about it, were unable to attend, or wanted more information on top of the course.

With respect to diabetes, one focus group participant raised the concern that people buy “second-hand” diabetes tests, and people are not sure where to begin or which direction to take when finding healthcare (participant x, focus group). Health insurance is hard to come by for some community members; a focus group participant stated that all some of their friends complain about is being unable to get medical insurance, which puts them in a tough position when things go wrong (participant x, focus group).

[...] I am seeing the need in the community is medical services and right now we’re talking about just one case, but in reality there are many cases [...] in reality we don’t have many resources for these types of problems. (participant x, focus group)

The participants pointed out that although they are only seeing a few cases, it is a large issue spread across the entire community.

Fear Surrounding Migration Statuses

I think that the problem is made worse because some [...] do not have their correct documentation and they don’t want to try anything. [...] That’s my impression. (participant x, focus group)

When it comes to discussing migration statuses in this paper, much of my codes “Fear” and “Migration Statuses” were applied to occurrences from my field notes. I would like to say that, in order to protect identities, I will not discuss many details of my observations surrounding the topic. Instead, I will discuss certain occurrences from my observations that characterize the fear occurring in the community. I will also share a couple stories not about Huerta-Ontario, but related to the surrounding communities in Ontario, that spark concern within me for undocumented community members.

Migration statuses were mentioned a couple times throughout the focus group, but these instances were the few times that I actually heard this topic being broached audibly. A participant mentioned tensions in the garden community among those with legal documentation

and those without it. They believe that if this issue were solved “for the majority, it would be a firmer, more concrete community” (participant x, focus group).

The other times that I noticed tensions surrounding immigration issues were in various instances in my internship work. One time, I was riding in a car with community members from Huerta del Valle. We did not have enough seats in the car, so the smallest person had to ride across the laps of other people in the backseat. The person kept lifting their head up in view of the passenger side windows, and other people in the car very fearfully made them put their head back down for fear of the authorities (Brown, field notes).

Another instance in which community members feared authorities happened while we were tabling at a community food fest in a city where a new Huerta garden is being developed. The Huerta people I came with had brought food that was not prepared in a county-approved kitchen, and they were incredibly fearful of the health inspectors making rounds at the fest (Brown, field notes). In both cases, apparent fear of authorities underlies the true fear of their statuses or statuses of others being discovered. I will say that in my time at Huerta, I met community members who were undocumented and confirmed the underlying fear that I suspected, though I am not at liberty to discuss this.

During my semester in CASA Pitzer, other students shared of troubling experiences regarding immigration statuses in the City of Ontario that I thought I would mention in this section. Two students working with an organization housed at the Social Justice Hub shared news of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) car rolling by the Hub very slowly. One of those same students also canvassed in Ontario with information about the 2020 United States Census, and she noticed something very troubling. As she was going door to door, community members seemed incredibly distrustful of her. She soon figured out that a woman

named “Claudia” had already canvassed that area. “Claudia,” however, was not from a known organization passing around information about the Census. She instead passed by each house, under the guise of providing information, and managed to collect information on the immigration statuses of many families living in that Ontario neighborhood. ICE is known to pull scams like this; a few weeks ago, news reports unveiled that it created an entire fake university to capture undocumented young people.

I hope that this information can reach Ontario residents, documented or undocumented, in the hopes that they receive information about the 2020 Census from a reputable source. The Census will *not* have a question about migration statuses, and nobody should be going door to door asking that question. What folks need to know, however, is that the Census is crucial in determining funding for local governments and resources. For this reason, community members should be encouraged to participate despite the fear and mistrust surrounding the Census.

Other Needs

This section covers more themes that came about in the September community forum outtake survey. Community members expressed financial stresses, a desire for more unity within the community, and concerns for the local homeless population.

In the September survey, six of the twenty-three people surveyed expressed concern over financial stresses. They indicated the need for more resources for low-income families, lower rents, a better job in one case, and more affordable foods (community forum surveys, 2019). Financial struggles and the lack of decent jobs were also apparent in my observations: for instance, a couple of involved farmers (I’ll call them A.B. & C.D.) at Huerta del Valle are trying to create a beehive business at one of the new garden sites for extra income. A.B. is a disabled immigrant and simply cannot find work, while C.D. is able-bodied is helping out A.B. with the

hopes of bringing home extra money to their family (Brown, field notes). Some community members need more financial support, and in the case of these farmers, it would help their situation if they could be paid for their work.

In the community forum and outtake surveys, community members also discussed the desire for more communication and more unity within the Huerta-Ontario community. Multiple people stated that they did not know the garden's hours and events due to lack of communication. In terms of unity, I do not know enough to know specifically what they were referring to. One surveyed person expressed concern for the homeless population that lives outside the garden, and focus group participants also were concerned for the wellbeing of local homeless people in Ontario (community forum surveys, 2019).

Current Challenges Faced by Huerta-Ontario

A part of this topic that I did not necessarily ask within my questions but emerged in the research was current challenges faced by the garden itself. This theme came about during my time spent working at the garden on occasional Friday and Saturday mornings, and through the focus group, which spent much of its time focusing on problems within the garden boundaries in Ontario. The main issue pointed out was the lack of attendance of community members, and the lack of volunteer presence.

Lack of Community Member and Volunteer Presence

One of the main challenges that participants in the focus group honed in on was the lack of community member and volunteer presence at the garden. Focus group participants pointed out that Huerta's issue is not the lack of community events: "the problem is the lack of attendance." This is not conducive to the the community desires for more feelings of unity and

wanting to learn about food. The participants also stated that there is always so much to do in the garden, and those that run the garden need more organization and volunteers to be more successful. One says that there needs to be a list, prioritizing farming activities in order to be more productive:

Yes, there is constantly a lot to do. For this reason, if we could make a list of what to do, that would be fantastic. In this way we will continue advancing, because that ensures there is something to do if you have time. (participant x, focus group)

They also expressed that, even if there is a list on what to do, some people who come to the garden do not know how to do those things. They suggest having “someone who teaches us, because many people don’t know what to do, how to plant, how to water, how to harvest” (participant x, focus group).

I also noticed the potential to have more volunteers in my time in the garden. When I went, there were generally no more than three other volunteers and usually one farmer working. The volunteers were usually Scripps or Cal Poly Pomona students who stayed between one and three hours at a time. One farmer told me explicitly, though, that they need more help tending the garden, a concern that was echoed in the focus group.

Brief Suggestions for Potential Responses to Community Challenges

I would like to use this section as a very brief, subjective add-on to the analysis of some possible strategies to improve some of the current issues faced by Huerta-Ontario. The community faces some large issues that I cannot solve. I cannot make recommendations on mental health or health access, or fix the unjust United States immigration system. One thing that I can suggest as a strategy for improving multiple issues, however, is increasing collaborations with local schools and community organizations. In terms of improving access to the garden, people called for increased use of the website and improved communication.

Increased Collaboration with Local Schools and Community Organizations

More collaboration can be used as a solution to the issues of low volunteer presence, fear and misinformation surrounding immigration issues, and the desire for more feelings of unity and community. In the Jurupa Valley community forum, schools collaborations were discussed as a way of bringing in volunteers:

Something that got me going was the talk of school partnerships. Local high school and college students could participate in service-learning or community engagement classes, receiving community service hours or praxis in their education while also helping out the farm and the local community. I thought about a possible partnership between the new garden and Pitzer: maybe an Environmental Analysis praxis course about community development and local climate solutions, with a focus on community gardens. (Brown, field notes)

Indeed, there is much opportunity to bring more students into Huerta for more frequent service days or participatory-learning opportunities. I know that, at Pitzer for example, we could use more social responsibility praxis classes, and Huerta del Valle could be the perfect site to pair with an environmental praxis course.

In the vein of ABCD, I wanted to point out that increased collaboration with other existing grassroots organizations in the area, such as Pitzer's other community partners, could help Huerta-Ontario folks to feel more connected to the City of Ontario and provide information and help regarding immigration issues. Multiple of Pitzer's community partners -- Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ), Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Collective (IEIYC), and Warehouse Workers Resource Center (WWRC) -- are currently working on turning out people for the 2020 Census and have a wealth of knowledge on this topic. ICIJ also does immigration education and helps people with DACA renewals. Huerta could maybe collaborate with these organizations to reduce fear in its community, and for its members to feel more connected to other local community partners.

Increased Use of Website and Improved Communication

In the Huerta-Ontario community forum and in the focus group, community members expressed the want for better communication from Huerta del Valle in terms of the gardens' hours and events, and general access to nutrition information. To do this, I suggest that Huerta first find out how folks are currently finding out about events and hours, and then ramp up communications from multiple outlets in order to reach as many people as possible. This could mean utilizing Facebook or Facebook groups, more emails, or more meetings.

With regard to the nutrition information, focus group participants suggested having a website where information from the nutrition class be accessible to the general community: "The majority have smartphones. It would be a website to give them a place to start. I think it would be a good starting point" (participant x, focus group). Maybe the Huerta del Valle website could have another tab that includes that information.

Conclusion

_____ In this place and for these people, Huerta del Valle is a revolutionary solution to so many issues posed by structural racism in the region. It has provided a place for people to relax, connect, improve their wellbeing, and practice a shared identity. It is incredible that, while already doing all of this, the organization has the heart to continue improving and adapting to community members' needs.

This paper is by no means an end all, be all assessment of the challenges and needs of Huerta-Ontario community members. Rather, I would like to think of it as a beginning of Huerta del Valle CASA interns doing a similar project every so often to ensure that community members' needs are met by Huerta-Ontario. I hope that my findings and brief suggestions were helpful to the organization, but I won't be offended if Huerta del Valle does not find this paper useful. I would like to end by writing briefly on possible new projects that could come out of this one, and by giving a final thank you.

Possible New Projects

While writing my first qualitative research paper when I studied abroad in Ecuador last year, my professor encouraged us to suggest to others how to build upon your research contributions. In a program like CASA Pitzer, in which students must do research every semester and hope that it's helpful and provoking to the partner organization, I felt that this was the perfect place to apply this idea. Here is a list of possible research questions/projects that emerged from this project and my experience with Huerta del Valle in general:

- Quantitative version of this project in CASA Spring 2020: Because my data included such a small set of community members, the next CASA-Huerta interns could maybe do

a quantitative study with the same research questions. A quantitative version, maybe with surveys, could reach more community members and create a larger picture of the needs and wants of folks at Huerta-Ontario.

- Information workshops surrounding the Census 2020: The Census will take place in April 2020, and is directly related to the amount of funding that local governments and local institutions receive. San Bernardino and Riverside Counties historically lack census turnout, receiving less funds than they should. Workshops like these can increase information and demystify the Census, pushing more people to participate.
- Qualitative needs assessments of communities at new garden sites: Projects like this one at the new garden sites could give the organization a better sense of what folks at each site are facing, and how their community garden should be tailored to fit their needs.
- An arts project to increase local visibility of and funding for Huerta del Valle (i.e. a bilingual documentary): Interns could do an arts project to raise awareness of the existence of Huerta del Valle, with the hopes of increasing engagement and involving more people in the gardens.

By no means are these concepts well outlined; however, I hope that they spark an idea in someone for a meaningful project.

Author's Thank You

To Huerta del Valle: I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me to be privy to your beautiful community, organization, and gardens for the past semester. Thank

you for helping me reconnect with my *latinidad* that is generationally lost; thank you for allowing me to be involved in work that is so healing and able to deepen my connection to this region I am from. I am so sorry if this research is not enough. I wanted to do so much this semester and am always wishing that I could do more. This organization is so rich in love and deserves all the support and luck in the world. I will always cherish my experience here and will always support you as best as I can. Thank you for bringing me in to grow with you.



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Appendix

1. Focus group guide

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1u9Sp_oeqLJFL4N14BT4oSrK_4i9bBJ_j4rxdHAUzx4/edit?usp=sharing

I am hesitant to release the focus group transcript for fear of it identifying participants. For the moment, I will keep it to myself.

2. Guide for what could have been the individual in-depth interview questions (and what still could be, in future research projects)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bTIaCs1maXbWo91rVK_9NGJyDguXkpi9BBGjJC6Ec1c/edit?usp=sharing

3. Ontario community forum survey data

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1szOsF38W61AMd7oY9G81FskSzxBjeDT0muZ77SDZy4I/edit?usp=sharing>

4. Kristen's field notes observations

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F-5ibALkXTL4wdnAhw6Sspk0IFv9d09hvRVwCN4L3o/edit?usp=sharing>

