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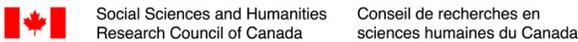
Food Health Ecosystems Lab Working Paper #1
Toronto Metropolitan University

**THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL: SUPPORTING
FOOD ACCESS**

Prepared by Sarah Elton,
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research for this working paper was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. A Toronto Metropolitan University Faculty of Arts grant supported the initial pandemic phase of the research.



The researchers would like to thank the participants in our study for sharing their time, expertise and opinions with us, sometimes during the very challenging periods of the pandemic. As per our ethics protocol, approved by the Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (2021-493), we have protected the confidentiality of our participants and do not identify them here.

We acknowledge and appreciate the partnership of the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office.

Staff from Toronto's Environment & Climate Division (formerly known as the Environment & Energy Division) also made helpful contributions to this report.

Thank you to Dr. Evan Fraser and Dr. Jayeeta Sharma for their scholarly support of this research.

Land Acknowledgement

Our lab is located in Michi-Saagiig Nishinaabeg Akiing (Mississauga Lands, Treaty 13, 1805). The city where we work is the traditional territory of Indigenous nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ontario Food Terminal supplies fresh produce to a variety of retail establishments in the city that support neighbourhood food access. These include the green grocers of main streets such as Bloor, Danforth, and Yonge, the many mid-sized independent grocery stores in neighbourhoods across the city, as well as smaller sellers such as produce peddlers.

We asked:

1. What role does the Ontario Food Terminal play in the province's foodshed?
2. What is the position of the wholesale Terminal—a public institution—in the city's food system?
3. How does the produce coming through the supply chains of the Ontario Food Terminal support neighbourhood food access?

Main objectives of this research:

1. To study the Terminal's role in supplying the independent retail sector, which can be seen by some as secondary to big box supermarkets.
2. To understand how the Terminal has an impact on food access in Toronto neighbourhoods.
3. To define the Ontario Food Terminal's role in the city's foodscape.

Methods:

Qualitative research methods were employed. Observational data were generated during regular site visits to the Terminal throughout the growing season of 2022 and at retailers across the city. Interviews were also conducted with a variety of food systems actors between the spring of 2020 and the early fall of 2022.



Main findings:

- The Ontario Food Terminal's steady supply of fresh fruits and vegetables from Ontario farms, as well as imported goods from the United States, Mexico and further afield, provide neighbourhoods in the city with access to healthy food choices.
- The Ontario Food Terminal serves a diverse retail landscape and widens neighbourhood food access in Toronto while supporting farmers in rural Ontario.
- The Ontario Food Terminal supplies produce to a range of retailers who serve ethno-cultural and community needs.
- This includes Toronto's mobile food peddlers who bring culturally-appropriate fruits and vegetables to people in lower-income communities in a way that their customers report to be convenient and affordable.

Vulnerabilities:

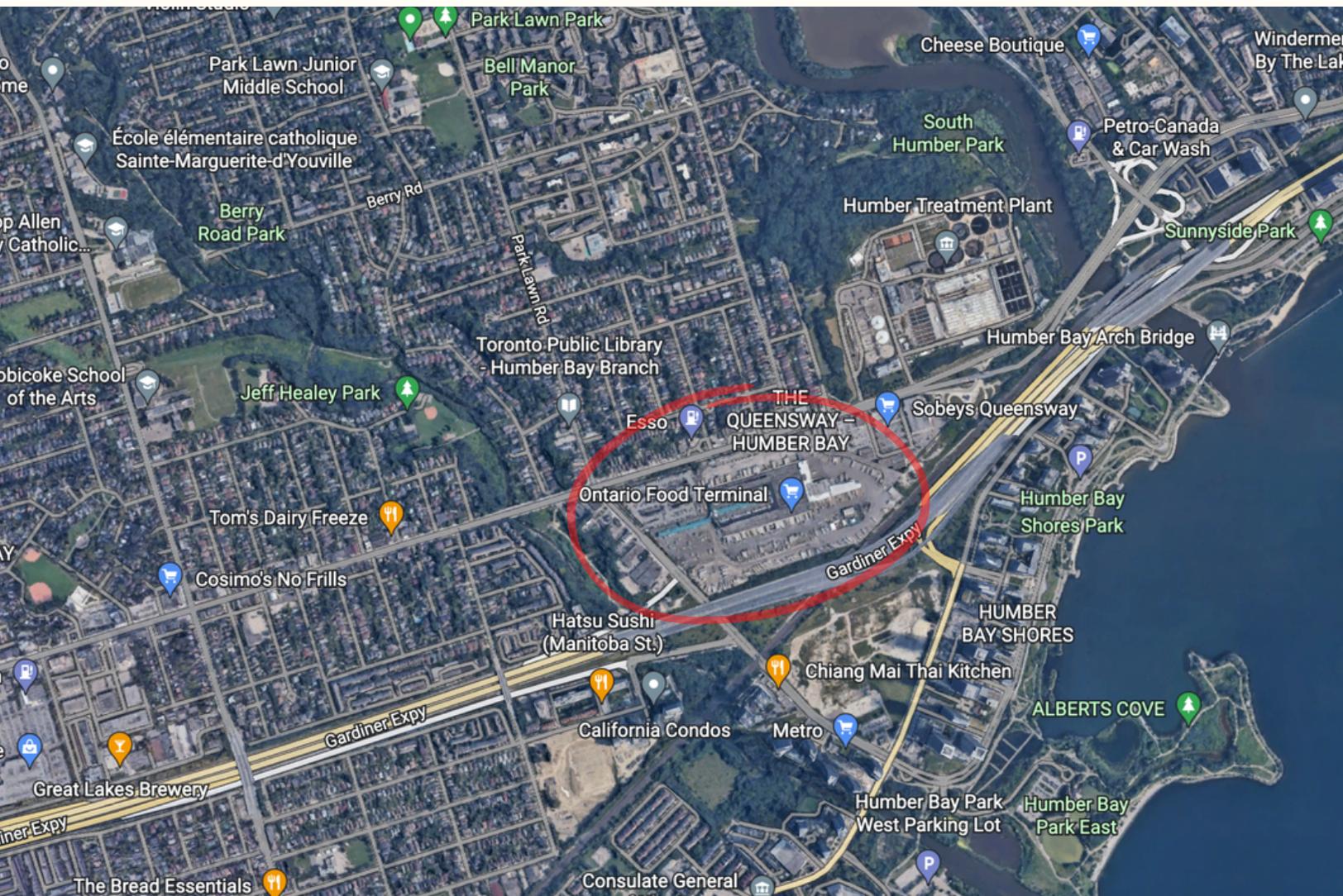
- The Ontario Food Terminal is vulnerable to the risk posed by extreme weather endangering the power supply to the Terminal (Zeuli et al. 2018). Further, the Ontario Food Terminal is vulnerable to transportation interruptions, including fuel shortages and border closures, due to its heavy reliance on trucks for distribution.
- There is a need to evaluate whether the produce sold at the Ontario Food Terminal has been grown with sustainable methods to best support a planet-friendly diet promoted by international organizations such as EAT Lancet as well as the Canada Food Guide.
- Condominiums and townhouses are planned in the vicinity of the Ontario Food Terminal. Our research underlines the significance of this public infrastructure in the growing city and the potential challenges that residential densification in the area may pose for its functioning.

Policy Recommendations:

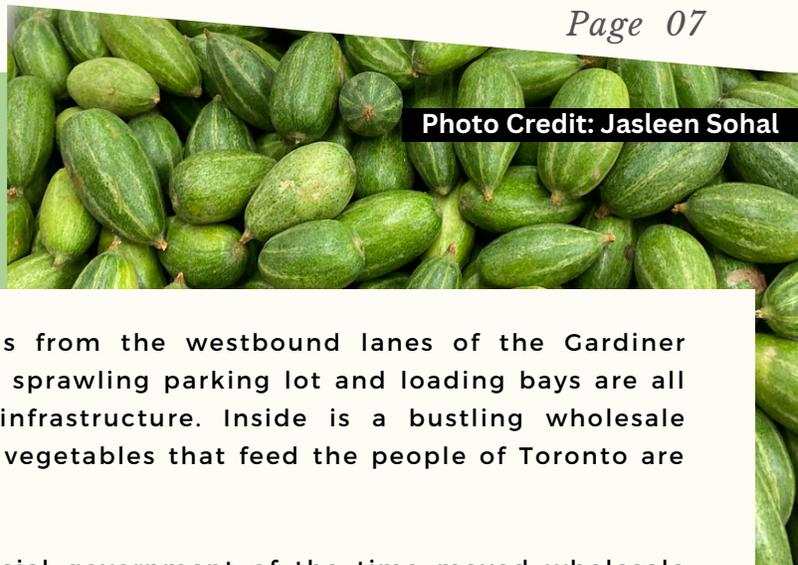
- With housing construction on the rise, it is imperative that municipal and provincial governments consider how to build communities with equitable, healthy food access to all residents. This includes considering neighbourhood food access and understanding the role of the existing food system infrastructure in the context of designing and redesigning communities.
- The Ontario Food Terminal is a marketplace for produce grown on Ontario Farms. Housing policies that encroach upon farmland, including peri-urban agricultural land, Greenbelt land as well as farms further afield from the Greater Toronto Area, endanger food access in the City of Toronto and the province in general. Any changes to agricultural land use policy must consider the Ontario Food Terminal and its role in the province's food security.

This working paper reports on some initial findings in our multi-year project. Our research is ongoing and we continue to investigate the sociopolitical dynamics of these produce supply chains.

THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL MAP



INTRODUCTION: A PUBLIC WHOLESALE MARKET



The best view of the Ontario Food Terminal is from the westbound lanes of the Gardiner Expressway, just past the Humber River. But the sprawling parking lot and loading bays are all you'll see of this important piece of public infrastructure. Inside is a bustling wholesale marketplace where many of the fresh fruits and vegetables that feed the people of Toronto are bought and sold, Sunday through Friday.

The Terminal opened in 1954 when the provincial government of the time moved wholesale produce sellers from Toronto's downtown St. Lawrence Market to the suburbs. Since then, fresh fruits and vegetables have arrived by rail and truck, from farms in Ontario, the United States and around the world.

The global supply chains of the food system have changed a lot over the almost 70 years that the Terminal has been in operation, but the purpose of the institution has not. Our research into produce supply chains in Toronto found that the Terminal continues to play a key role in the city, supporting access to fresh fruits and vegetables in a variety of neighbourhoods. It also supplies produce to consumers all over Ontario, Atlantic Canada and into the United States. Today, there are 20 produce wholesale companies with leases that enable them to operate out of the Terminal. According to Terminal staff, 250-300 Ontario farmers rent stalls in the area of the facility called the Farmers' Market and farm dealers sell local produce from other farms in the province. The Terminal reports that 2 billion pounds of food passes through the facility every year.

Every night, starting not long after midnight, dozens of large tractor trailers begin to arrive at the gates on the Queensway. Then over the course of the early morning hours, buyers from a variety of food businesses arrive to purchase the goods they need for the day. These include grocery stores, small vegetable merchants, caterers, restaurants, cafés, institutional food procurers, jobbers who sell wholesale to various clients, prepared-food producers, and many other food-related industries. If you purchase fruits and vegetables at an independent grocer or neighbourhood produce-seller, eat at the city's many independent restaurants, or order food from a local catering company, your diet includes fresh fruits and vegetables that have passed through the Ontario Food Terminal.

This report communicates research, conducted between spring 2020 and fall 2022 on the Ontario Food Terminal and its produce supply chains, by The Food Health Ecosystems Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University. We conducted interviews during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued as businesses adapted to the current situation.

Our evidence suggests that this public institution is a critical piece of urban infrastructure, supporting access to fresh fruits and vegetables in neighborhoods across the city. That's because the supply chains of the Ontario Terminal sell produce to a wide range of independent food businesses. These include independent grocers and restaurants, and also smaller businesses that are part of the city's food system, such as neighbourhood vegetable peddlers who bring affordable foods to some of the city's lowest-income communities. In our research, we focus on the independent retail sector that is often seen as secondary to the big box supermarkets run by the major Canadian and American brands, but whom we observe play a vital role in the city's foodscape.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study of the produce supply chains at the Ontario Food Terminal emerged out of research conducted during the first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic. In our initial study we found that the produce supply chains that bring fruits and vegetables to the people of Toronto through the facility were **not** interrupted by the spread of the novel virus. While much of society shut down, the Ontario Food Terminal continued to operate. Terminal staff and the various food businesses navigated the many public health and logistical challenges. There were some product shorts, however, there were no fruit and vegetable shortages in these supply chains. At the same time, other researchers were documenting rising rates of food insecurity in the city (Ayer, 2020; Men & Tarasuk, 2021). It became clear that while there were plenty of fruit and vegetables in the neighbourhood grocery stores and independent chains that work out of the Terminal, not everybody could buy them. This prompted us to ask questions such as, what role does the Ontario Food Terminal play in the city's foodshed? The big box supermarkets have their own supply chains and only sometimes source produce at the Terminal. So what is the role of the wholesale Terminal—a public institution—in the city's food system, at almost 70 years old? And do the fruits and vegetables that come through supply chains of the Ontario Food Terminal support neighbourhood food access, or not?

RESEARCH METHODS

To understand the role of the Ontario Food Terminal in Toronto's food supply chain, we conducted regular site visits throughout the growing season of 2022. A researcher made early morning visits, when the Terminal is most busy, to generate observational data and to best understand how the site works. Qualitative research methods were employed, such as taking photographs of vendors' stands and produce, as well as conversations with farmers and vendors. Visits to the warehouse and cooler supplemented this observational data. Further interviews were conducted between the spring of 2020 and the early fall of 2022 with a variety of food systems actors, from wholesalers to retailers to logistics experts. We also conducted regular visits to a variety of retailers in the city and interviewed business owners and customers. The study has approval from the Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (2021-493). Following research ethics protocol, we protect the confidentiality of research participants.



Photo Credit: Kyle Resendes

POLICY CONTEXT

The City of Toronto has a loose policy framework that underlines the municipal government's commitment to ensuring safe and healthy access to food in a sustainable manner.

- In 2010, the City's Board of Health adopted the Toronto Food Strategy to support access to healthy, affordable and culturally diverse food. The strategy promotes policy to support an urban food system that is socially just, fights climate change and looks after the welfare of citizens, as well as the environment. Toronto's Food Strategy is now in a transitional phase due to the food security issues exacerbated during the pandemic and the impacts to residents living in poverty. As such, plans are underway to fully embed the work of advancing food security and equity into the City's Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- In 2015, Toronto was among the 150 cities that signed onto the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. It is the first international agreement on sustainable urban food systems.
- Toronto is a signatory to the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration which is a commitment to climate action by cities. The commitment includes promoting a 'Planetary Health Diet' to meet citizens' nutritional needs while reducing emissions.
- In December 2019, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health - Dr. Eileen de Villa - signed the World Resources Institute's Cool Food Pledge - a commitment to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the food that the City procures by 25 percent by 2030 relative to 2015.
- In 2021, the City Council approved the first Canadian 'Black Food Sovereignty Plan' for Toronto to respond to the higher prevalence of food insecurity in Toronto's Black community. Black families in Toronto are 3.5 times more prone to food insecurity than white families. The plan's main goal is to support initiatives, led by the Black community, to create self-sufficiency for food sovereignty in the community.
- In April 2022, Toronto City Council adopted the City's first Reconciliation Action Plan to advance truth, justice and reconciliation. The plan includes a commitment to improve access to traditional foods and medicines.

Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights in 1976 which states that to be free from hunger is a fundamental right. In 2001, the Toronto City Council adopted the Toronto Food Charter to ensure food access, availability, affordability and the freedom to choose healthy, culturally appropriate food through a sustainable food system. There is now a call, twenty years after the Toronto Food Charter was passed, to rewrite the document so that it is responsive to the needs of people who are more likely to be food insecure in the city, specifically racialized, Black, Indigenous People as well as people with disabilities and residents who pay rent as opposed to owning their own homes.

A DAY AT THE TERMINAL

by Kyle Resendes

For many at the Terminal, the day starts in the morning hours-somewhere between seven and nine. But for the farmers at the Ontario Food Terminal, the day started yesterday. At around 10:00 pm, farmers load their produce into their trucks and drive to the Terminal to begin setting up shop. Depending on the size of the farm, it could be only the owner and a helper who work the stand or there could be up to 10 workers helping out. Boxes that have been pre-ordered by wholesale customers are set aside with handwritten notes indicating the buyer-if you are a buyer and you didn't secure your box of asparagus you might be out of luck. Many farmers, and dealers too, have regular customers who trust their judgment on produce quality and price and order in advance. At 2:00 am buyers begin to slowly trickle into the market looking for the best deal from their preferred farmer. Deals are done quickly with little bartering these days. People want to be in and out of the market because time is money for small businesses. It is about 6:00 am when the market is most busy: yelling, hollering, and engines on idle all work in symphony. Pallet loaders swerve in and out of crowds with seemingly little effort on the part of their drivers.

The market is typically busy with buyers trying to supply their needs. One can find a single farmer simultaneously taking orders from a dozen buyers. By 10:00 am the day is done. All that remains are buyers looking to bargain down to the lowest possible price. Some farmers have to take the loss because their produce would spoil if they had to bring it back to their farms.

Over the course of the research, the scenery of the market changed with Ontario's growing season. In the peak of summer, the market was packed with fresh strawberries, peaches, apples, blueberries, and watermelon. When it is not prime growing season, customers will find more produce that can be stored, such as apples, potatoes, onions, and garlic.



Photo Credit: Kyle Resendes

THE TERMINAL IS RUN BY A CROWN CORPORATION, MEANING THAT IT IS AN ORGANIZATION CREATED BY GOVERNMENT THAT OPERATES AT ARM'S LENGTH FROM THE PROVINCE. A BOARD OF DIRECTORS, MADE UP OF MEMBERS OF THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY, OVERSEES OPERATIONS THERE. IT IS SELF-FUNDED.

THE TERMINAL IS GOVERNED BY THE ONTARIO TERMINAL ACT AND THE FACILITY HAS ITS OWN POLICE FORCE.

ONTARIO FARMERS

THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL FEATURES A FARMERS' MARKET WHERE WHOLESALE BUYERS CAN SOURCE ONTARIO PRODUCE. THIS MARKET IS MADE UP OF DEALERS AND FARMERS. DEALERS SELL A COLLECTION OF PRODUCE FROM DIFFERENT VENDORS WHEREAS FARMERS DIRECTLY SELL THEIR OWN PRODUCE. THE FARMERS' MARKET IS DISTINCT FROM THE WAREHOUSE TENANTS WHO SOURCE PRODUCE FROM ONTARIO AS WELL AS FROM FARMS IN OTHER PROVINCES, THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND AROUND THE WORLD.

FOOD SECURITY

When a person or household is food insecure, they have difficulty accessing adequate quality and quantity of food in a dignified manner (McIntyre et al., 2012). People who are food insecure tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables (Dachner et al., 2010; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2008; Ricciuto et al., 2006). In Canada, a low income means a person has less purchasing power to buy healthy foods (Ricciuto et al., 2006). Fruits and vegetables can be costlier than less healthy food options (Dachner et al., 2010; Hutchinson & Tarasuk, 2021; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2003; Olstad et al., 2021; Ricciuto & Tarasuk, 2007). A higher consumption of energy-dense, ultra processed foods can lead to nutritional deficiencies and other health impacts (Dachner et al., 2010; Hutchinson & Tarasuk, 2021; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2008).

In Toronto, 1 in 5, or 18.5% of households, reported experiencing some level of food insecurity in 2017 (City of Toronto, 2019). This is a major public health issue. Food insecurity is associated with poor physical and mental health, high burden on health care and adverse health conditions (McIntyre et al., 2012; St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2017).

Income and poverty status are the strongest predictors of food insecurity—as income decreases, the prevalence and severity of food insecurity rises (Dubelt-Moroz et al., 2022; Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2010; St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2017). Research has shown that the probability of food insecurity halves when going from low to high after-tax income (St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2017). However, it is important to consider the multidimensional nature of food insecurity. It is an issue that it is influenced by a complex set of socioeconomic factors and not income alone (Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2018).



NEIGHBOURHOOD FOOD ACCESS AND FOOD SECURITY

People have food security when they can access the food they need to be healthy. One of the many factors that support people's food security is the retail foodscape—what food is sold nearby that is affordable and culturally appropriate. Neighbourhood food access is influenced by social, economic and physical barriers such as the number of grocery stores, the cost of healthy foods, the availability of culturally diverse foods and transportation for customers to and from the store. When a neighbourhood has limited healthier food available, the neighbourhood can be designated as a food desert, food swamp or food mirage. Food deserts are caused when there is a lack of physical access to healthier food whereas food mirages are caused by the inability to afford healthier food in the neighbourhood (Young, 2022). Food swamps, which are more common in Canada, occur when there is access to healthy food but in an environment that is abundant in unhealthy food (Young, 2022).

Food access in Toronto is uneven across neighbourhoods (Agincourt Community Services Association; Toronto Food Policy Council, 2017; Young, 2022). A 2018 report, prepared by external consultants for Toronto Public Health, found that 17 of the city's 140 neighbourhoods had no retail for people to buy food (Zeuli et al. 2018). These areas were located in Scarborough, Etobicoke, and North York. In some areas, people who don't have easy access to the foods they want choose to travel long distances, and shop at multiple locations, to purchase desired foods and find reasonable prices (Jacobs, 2017). Several initiatives in Toronto have promoted food access over the years, such as the Grab Some Good project which was a partnership between the Food Strategy team at Toronto Public Health and community partners including FoodShare (Young, 2022) to help some corner stores, and stalls at subway stations, sell fresh fruits and vegetables. FoodShare currently operates Good Food markets across Toronto in partnership with the City of Toronto. In our research, we highlight the role of small entrepreneurs who hold a municipal peddlers' license and sell fresh fruits and vegetables, in expanding neighbourhood food access. We also note that there is debate about the extent to which geographic access to food impacts food insecurity (see Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2010).



SMALL GROCERY STORES

by Jasleen Sohal

Yarl's Superstore is an unassuming community grocer, located on Parliament Street next door to a colourful plant shop. The store's small size can be deceiving when considering the abundant variety of products sold inside. The store offers pretty much anything one might find in a South Asian kitchen. There are pulses, masalas, a variety of Indian snacks, ready-to-eat plates of Indian food, fresh raw fish and meat, and even some cooking tools and utensils. Importantly, there are South Asian vegetables such as drumsticks, eggplants, long squash and more. Access to these ingredients is significant to South Asian populations as they are incorporated in everyday meals, creating a sense of comfort and familiarity. The store sources a majority of its produce from the Ontario Food Terminal such as bananas, okra, tomatoes, lemon, lime, eggplants, cabbage, plantain, zucchini, mangoes, apples, oranges and more.

As you enter Yarl's, you are typically greeted by a smiling face from behind the counter and the smell of South Asian spices. It is common to hear customers having friendly conversations in Tamil with the employees. Customers come from closeby neighbourhoods due to the convenience, variety of products, and the close relationship they have with the employees. However, some customers also travel from neighbourhoods further afield, such as Dufferin, in search of South Asian produce. Some vegetables they sell, such as drumsticks, can be hard to find, especially in a chain store. Yarl's provides people in the neighborhood with easy access to a variety of fresh produce in a small grocery without having to spend too much time and energy at a larger store. Moreover, it is the only store in the immediate St. Jamestown/Cabbagetown neighborhood that caters to the grocery needs of the South Asian population.



Photo Credit: Jasleen Sohal

THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL SUPPLIES A DIVERSITY OF FOOD RETAILERS:

- INDEPENDENT CHAINS
- NEIGHBOURHOOD GROCERY STORES
- GREEN GROCER AND PRODUCE STANDS
- MOBILE PEDDLERS

Toronto's food peddlers: Connecting the Terminal to the Tower Communities and beyond

Mobile fruit and vegetable sellers bring low-cost fresh fruit and vegetables from the Ontario Food Terminal to neighbourhoods across the city. The term 'peddler' is used by city licensing to describe these small, mobile businesses. The entrepreneurs bring their offerings to lower income areas, including tower communities and Toronto Community Housing Corporation neighbourhoods as well as to locations that are significant to the community. One seller told us how he sells produce in mosque parking lots, when Muslims attend Friday prayers. Some of these peddler markets are seasonal, while others operate all year round.

At one summertime pop up market in Scarborough, people from buildings and houses close by started to gather in anticipation of the produce sellers' arrival. After a few minutes, a truck pulled up and the workers quickly unloaded several cases of fresh produce for sale. Customers picked out what they liked—cherries, peaches, pomegranates, cilantro, fresh fenugreek, okra, eggplant, grapes, oranges, ginger, and more. One seller called out to the customers, encouraging them to buy the low-priced fruit and vegetables—a bag of limes for \$2, a bunch of fresh coriander for \$1, or fenugreek for \$2, and several kilos of onions for \$7.

The market buzzed with energy. The seller sliced a fresh Ontario cantaloupe, offering customers a taste and answered price inquiries. Among both the customers and the sellers, there was laughing and conversation. Customers told us that this market is known for its cheap prices and fresh produce. The sellers explained that the produce is fresh because they source it from the Ontario Food Terminal in the morning. If the peddlers buy their produce later in the morning, they are more likely to secure deals on items that wholesalers and farmers need to move that day. This is one way they keep prices down for their customers.

These private enterprises play a similar role to the mobile pop-up markets supported by non-profit organizations such as FoodShare's [Good Food Markets](#).



Photo Credit: Jasleen Sohal

GREEN GROCERS, MID-SIZED GROCERS, SMALL CHAINS

The Ontario Food Terminal supplies fresh produce to a variety of grocery stores in the city that offer something different from the big box supermarkets. This includes the green grocers that have long been a feature of main streets such as Bloor, Danforth, and Yonge. These small shops, with their characteristic display of produce spilling onto the sidewalk, typically offer well-priced fruit and vegetables ready to eat that day. The owners of these stores often source their own produce at the Terminal, driving to the Queensway in the morning hours. Also they can be served by small businesses who also purchase at the Terminal and supply the grocers.

Mid-sized independent grocery stores are significant community destinations, such as Iqbal's in Thorncliffe Park and Fiesta Farms on Christie Street, as well as smaller-scale grocers such as Maselli's that has been open on Danforth Avenue near Donlands since 1956. In an inner suburb like Scarborough, dozens of independent grocery stores offer a wide variety of culturally significant produce, some of which arrives via the Ontario Food Terminal. We observed in our research that there is a wide selection of culturally significant fruits and vegetables offered at independent grocers, such as mangoes which are sold by the case, okra, and plantain. Our observation is in line with other studies, such as one from Vancouver, where independent grocers were more likely to offer culturally meaningful produce for African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern consumers (But, 2017).

The Terminal supplies vegetables to support the wide diversity of independent grocers that cater to all Torontonians. Independent retailers such as Iqbal's, Galleria, Pusateri's and Summerhill Market, each cater to their respective clientele in terms of food culture. In some stores, fresh fruits and vegetables are sold alongside prepared foods often made from Terminal produce. These businesses provide people access to a wide variety of produce and related products that widen consumer choice beyond what is available through the big box supply chains. The higher-priced stores source their produce at the Terminal alongside buyers for stores where produce costs less. Grocers serving a particular cultural community, such as Iqbal's catering to South Asian foods as well as other foodways, have been found to better serve ethno-cultural needs than big box supermarkets (Komakech & Jackson, 2016; Mankekar, 2002; Bégin & Sharma, 2018). A recent study in Toronto found that "ethnic grocers" are making culturally important foods available, especially to South Asians, where big box brands have not (Perry et al. 2020).



ANALYSIS: THE ROLE OF THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL IN SUPPORTING NEIGHBOURHOOD FOOD ACCESS IN TORONTO



Photo Credit: Jasleen Sohal

Our data demonstrates the important role of the Ontario Food Terminal in the Toronto foodscape. The steady supply of fresh fruits and vegetables from Ontario farms, as well as imported goods from the United States, Mexico and further afield, provide many neighbourhoods in the city with access to healthy food choices. We have described the variety of retailers that make produce available to people. This diversity in the retail foodscape in Toronto means that people in many neighbourhoods have a lot of selection when it comes to deciding where to buy their groceries. In particular, the Ontario Food Terminal is vital in supplying a network of produce peddlers with their merchandise. These mobile enterprises have been overlooked in past analyses of the Toronto food system and the Food Health Ecosystems lab will continue to research them to better understand the role they play. However, it is clear from our initial analysis that the peddlers bring culturally-appropriate fruits and vegetables to people in a way that their customers report to be convenient and affordable. Notably, these peddlers source their produce from the same wholesale marketplace as high-priced stores.

The small greengrocers and medium-sized grocery stores, as well as the peddlers, play an important role in providing a customer base for mid-sized Ontario farms via the Terminal. Other studies have documented that it is challenging if not impossible for mid-sized and small farms to supply the major supermarket chains (McCallum, Campbell & MacRae, 2014).

These Ontario farms do not grow food in high enough volumes to supply the big box stores, nor do the corporate contracts of the supermarkets typically work for smaller and mid-sized producers. The wholesale market, where wholesale businesses and farmers sell shoulder-to-shoulder every day, means that food sold later in the morning will cost less. As we observed, deals are made as the clock ticks towards noon in order to move the perishables and make space for tomorrow's load. We also observed how these deals are passed onto the consumer, for example by the vegetable peddlers, whose business model is to sell low-cost produce in lower-income communities. Further, the smaller retail and mid-sized grocers better serve ethno-cultural and community needs, as we observed and others have documented (Komakech & Jackson, 2016; Manekar, 2002; Bégin & Sharma, 2018). Thus, the Ontario Food Terminal, in serving a diverse retail landscape, widens neighbourhood food access and supports both rural and urban Ontario.

Fruits and vegetables are key to a healthy diet and support health in many ways. When people cook with fruits and vegetables, they also have an opportunity to practice their food culture and connect with family, as is promoted by [Canada's Food Guide](#). While our report focuses on the City of Toronto, many produce buyers at the Terminal supply fresh fruits and vegetables to cities across the province of Ontario, the north, and the Atlantic provinces also. Thus the food system benefits of the Terminal extend beyond the city to benefit the province at large.

VULNERABILITIES AT THE TERMINAL

In 2019, it was reported in the media that the province was considering selling the Ontario Food Terminal to a private company to run, or sell its 40 acres of land to developers. This episode made Ontario's food system stakeholders aware of the impact of possible future changes by government to the Terminal. Research participants frequently spoke about this incident and underlined the importance of protecting the Terminal.

In 2018, a report prepared by external consultants for Toronto Public Health flagged risks posed by extreme weather that could hinder operations, specifically water damage to the power supply due to the location of electrical infrastructure (Zeuli, Nijhuis, Gerson-Nieder, 2018). While the Terminal is in a waterfront neighbourhood, its location on the border of the Mimico Creek watershed means it is not at risk of riverine flooding, as per the Toronto Region Conservation Authority's Flood Plain map. This map was drawn using data from Hurricane Hazel, a major regional storm that took place in 1954, the same year the Terminal was opened. Further, the Ontario Food Terminal is vulnerable to transportation interruptions, including fuel shortages and border closures, due to its heavy reliance on trucks for distribution. Despite the successful adaptation to the pandemic at the Terminal, there remains logistical vulnerabilities.

Recent research (IPCC, 2019; Willett et al., 2019) underlines the significant contribution of the industrial food system to greenhouse gas emissions, environmental destruction and to climate change. The City of Toronto's own policy supports a sustainable food system that is in line with the C40/Milan Food Policy Pact/Food Charter. A plant-based diet is promoted as a planetary diet, which leads to a greater reliance on fresh produce. However, other research has underlined the importance of evaluating how sustainable the farming systems are that produce fruit and vegetables. It is challenging, if not impossible, to evaluate at the Ontario Food Terminal whether the produce sold has been grown with truly sustainable methods. In a sustainable food system, the role of wholesalers could be to ensure that food sold is indeed sustainably grown.



Policy Recommendations

Housing construction is on the rise in the city. Over the last year alone, there has been a 4 percent rise in housing starts (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2022). As new communities are built and older ones are densified it is imperative that municipal and provincial governments consider how to build communities with equitable, healthy food access to all residents. This includes considering food access when designing new neighbourhoods and adding housing to existing ones. It also involves understanding the role of food system infrastructure that is already in operation. For example, condominiums and townhouses are planned around the Ontario Food Terminal. Our research, that demonstrates the important role of the Ontario Food Terminal in supporting neighbourhood food access, underlines the significance of this public infrastructure in the growing city. Just like the Redpath Sugar Factory has been considered in waterfront design, a redevelopment of the Queensway area similarly needs to consider the industrial needs of this site such as the truck traffic that arrives through the night. This will ensure that the needs of the area's future residents are balanced with the food access needs of the city and province.

Further, the Ontario Food Terminal is a marketplace for produce grown on Ontario farms. Housing policies that encroach upon farmland, including peri urban agricultural land, Greenbelt land as well as farms further afield, endanger food access in the City of Toronto and the province in general. Any changes to agricultural land use policy must consider the Ontario Food Terminal and its role in the province's food security.



Photo Credit: Jasleen Sohal

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