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Utilizing Data Collection and Networking to Characterize and Strengthen Farmers' Markets in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Abstract

Farmers' markets have been burdened with the expectation that they be spaces that improve the environment, address nutritional disparities, provide economic opportunity for small farms and businesses, create community, and overcome racial inequality. This is especially true of areas with high poverty and racial diversity. To better understand the commonalities and differences between Wisconsin's urban and rural farmers' markets, a statewide survey was sent to farmers' market managers around the State. Farmers' markets in Milwaukee County were further separated out from the State's urban market data to better understand the relationship of the data to the counties' demographics, segregation, and poverty rate. The primary differences between Milwaukee County markets, other urban markets, and rural markets in Wisconsin include their structure, staff, SNAP redemption, and vendor demographics. Milwaukee County markets were more likely to be stand-alone entities or affiliated with a government agency, have paid managers, accept SNAP benefits, and have more vendor racial diversity. Rural Wisconsin markets were more likely to be associated with a local business or chamber, have volunteer managers, lack SNAP redemption services and have predominantly white vendors.

Keywords

Demographics, market manager, poverty, segregation, SNAP

Disciplines

University Extension

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Abstract

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INTRODUCTION

Farmers' markets have been burdened with the expectation that they be a panacea. In Wisconsin, they have transformed from simple gatherings of farmers and gardeners selling fresh produce from their tailgates in a field or on the side of the road into spaces that are accountable to improve the environment, address nutritional disparities, provide economic opportunity for small farms and businesses, create community, and overcome racial inequality. These are lofty expectations for farmers' market managers and boards that are often without paid staff.

Demographics influence the extent to which each of these aspirations is valued and the potential success of realizing them at individual farmers' markets. Milwaukee County, which includes the City of Milwaukee and some of the surrounding communities, tops the list of the most segregated areas in the United States. The extent of this segregation and the associated poverty rates in each area of the County have implications on an individual farmers' market level.

Milwaukee County is in Southeast Wisconsin and is home to nearly one million people. It is located on Lake Michigan approximately 90 miles north of Chicago, Illinois. According to the U.S. Census Bureau population estimates for 2023, Milwaukee County has two distinct minority populations. The northern part of the County is characterized by a high percentage of Black residents and south of the City of Milwaukee is home to primarily Hispanic/Latino residents (Fig. 1). The County's population is 27.1% Black, 16.1% Hispanic/Latino, and 49.1% White (non-Hispanic). Milwaukee County is home to 69% of Wisconsin's Black population.

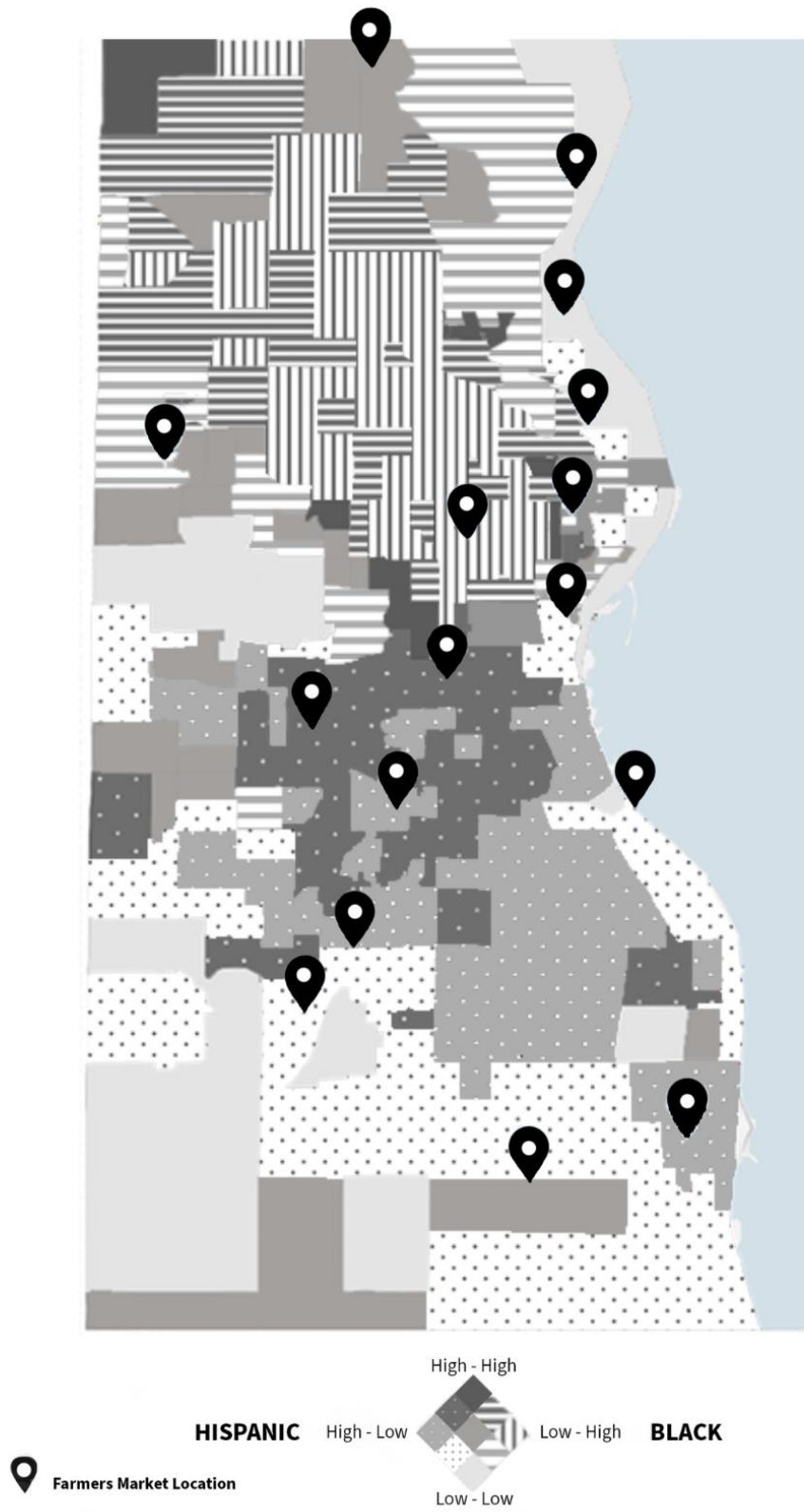


Figure 1. Map of Milwaukee County race and ethnicity demographics in relation to farmers market locations.

In addition to racial segregation, Milwaukee County, at 17.5%, is the only one of the 72 counties in Wisconsin with a statistically significant deviation from the State's mean poverty level of 10.8% (Smeeding and Thornton 2018). In a Milwaukee County supplement to the Wisconsin Poverty report, the County was divided into eight areas utilizing a measure of poverty called the Wisconsin Poverty Measure (WPM). This metric goes beyond the Federal Supplemental Poverty Measure's methodology by taking into consideration non-cash benefits/taxes and adjusting for the area's cost of living. In these eight areas, the poverty rates ranged from 8.4 to 38.2 percent (Fig. 2).

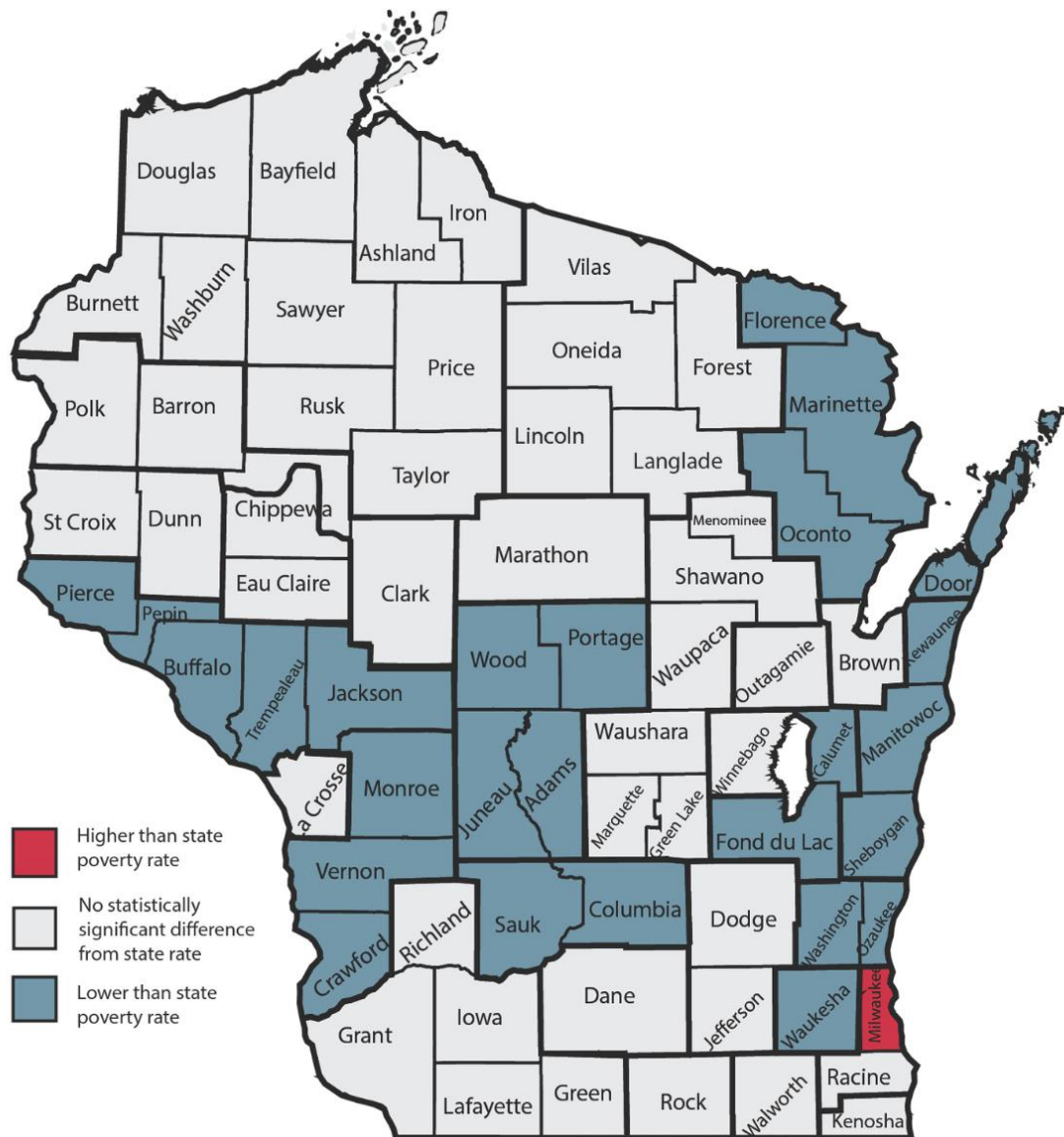


Figure 2. Wisconsin Counties with 2016 Wisconsin Poverty Measure poverty rates above or below the state rate of 10.8% using the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Research on Poverty tabulations of 2016 American Community Survey public use data.

Milwaukee County's high poverty rate and characterization as a food desert elevate the importance of farmers' markets in increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables and in turn improve health outcomes in the County. In the 2013 Milwaukee Health Report, data showed that

70% of individuals in the area with lower or middle socioeconomic status consume inadequate servings of fruits and vegetables (Greer et al., 2013). This statistic has spurred government, not for profits, neighborhood associations, and farmers' markets to band together in addressing this need. Recent projects undertaken in response to these needs include increasing the number of farmers' markets providing access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) benefits, the 2019 creation of the Fresh Food Access Fund grant program by the City of Milwaukee, and the Milwaukee Market Match nutrition incentive program.

The pervasiveness of poverty has helped to alleviate some of the stigmas associated with the use of benefits at the market, including discomfort attending a farmers' market and confusion on how to utilize benefits (Alkon and McCullen, 2010; Aptekar, 2019; Guthman, 2008). However, challenges in bringing people to the market persist. Other scholars have identified some of these barriers. They include the location of the market in relation to the persons residence, transportation, the limited days and times that farmers' markets are open, and the selection or seasonality of produce/products available (Grace et al., 2007).

There can also be tension between those who use benefits at the market and farmers selling EBT eligible items. Many of the vendors come from the peri-urban and rural areas surrounding Milwaukee County and have strong beliefs opposed to government food assistance programs that are utilized by low-income customers (Krokowski, 2011). Because many markets require that vendors with eligible items accept EBT through market run redemption programs, vendors may signal their reluctance to accept benefits, risking marginalization of the market's primary customers (Hall, 2012; Metz and Scherer, 2021).

Although the community where the market is located helps to determine vendor composition, services available, and other market characteristics, for most vendors, profitability is essential. Farming is a business that requires long hours and hard work. For most fresh market vegetable growers selling direct to customers, it is the only way to capture enough revenue from their produce to keep their farms operational and support their families. Farmers that sell their produce wholesale, receive only 19-20 cents of each dollar paid by the customer (Grace et al., 2007). Unfortunately, the challenges of vendor recruitment and retention are more pronounced in low-income urban areas (Fang et al., 2013, Fisher, 2018).

There are multiple stakeholders involved in a successful farmers' market. Market supporters, vendors, customers, and the market manager's needs must be considered when establishing a stable market that has value for the vendors and for the local community. This research will look at the attributes of farmers' markets in Milwaukee County compared with other farmers' markets in Wisconsin to help determine the unique qualities that have sustained existing farmers' markets and look for opportunities for these markets to continue to serve vendor and customer needs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was created for statewide distribution by a multidisciplinary team including University of Wisconsin Madison campus and Extension based faculty and staff. This group included farmers' market practitioners in the areas of research, technical assistance, nutritional outreach, SNAP benefits, and nutrition incentives. The survey was crafted to align and expand upon aspects of a farmers' market data collection tool called Farm to Facts (F2F). The F2F tool was created for farmers' market managers and organizations that use data, or want to start using data, to make informed decisions and communicate with stakeholders to achieve market goals.

The survey included 42 questions about the farmers' market, its operation, infrastructure, budget, staff, product mix, vendor demographic, SNAP redemption, and nutrition incentives and took 30-45 minutes to complete. It was created in the Qualtrics platform and launched in the late summer of 2022. The survey link was sent within an email explaining the survey, its' value, and how the data would be used. Markets were assured that individual market data would be anonymized, and no market would be identified individually in the results or products associated with the survey. The survey was sent to 207 farmers' markets with a listed email address with the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association (WFMA). The WFMA characterizes a market as a distinct entity if it occurs at a unique time and location from another existing farmers' market. It defines a farmers' market as "a public and recurring assembly of farmers or their representatives selling the food that

they produced directly to consumers.” A reminder email was sent to the same markets two weeks later.

After the summer farmers’ market season had closed, markets with email addresses were contacted individually by project staff. Markets without listed emails and those who did not respond to the survey request were called and asked to supply an email address to receive the survey link or schedule a time for project staff to enter the data on their behalf. It was necessary to contact some markets repeatedly by phone and email. Participating farmers’ markets were not required to answer any question in the survey. The survey was closed in June of 2023 with 139 non-duplicated responses, seven of which were from Milwaukee County farmers’ markets.

Data was downloaded into a spreadsheet for analysis. For this project, markets were coded as one of three categories for comparison: rural, urban (markets in urban areas outside of Milwaukee County) and Milwaukee County markets (all of which fit the definition of urban). Farmers’ markets were designated as urban if they are located in areas of the State with a population of 50,000 or more and rural if the market is located in an area with a population of less than 50,000. The United States Census Bureau 2023 population estimates were used to determine population.

RESULTS

The survey data identifies commonalities and differences between urban and rural farmers’ markets in the State. Bringing these aspects of farmers’ markets together has helped researchers to identify where to focus future efforts. It has also improved our understanding of the different strategies applied by urban Wisconsin farmers’ markets and Milwaukee County markets based on the extent of local poverty and racial segregation.

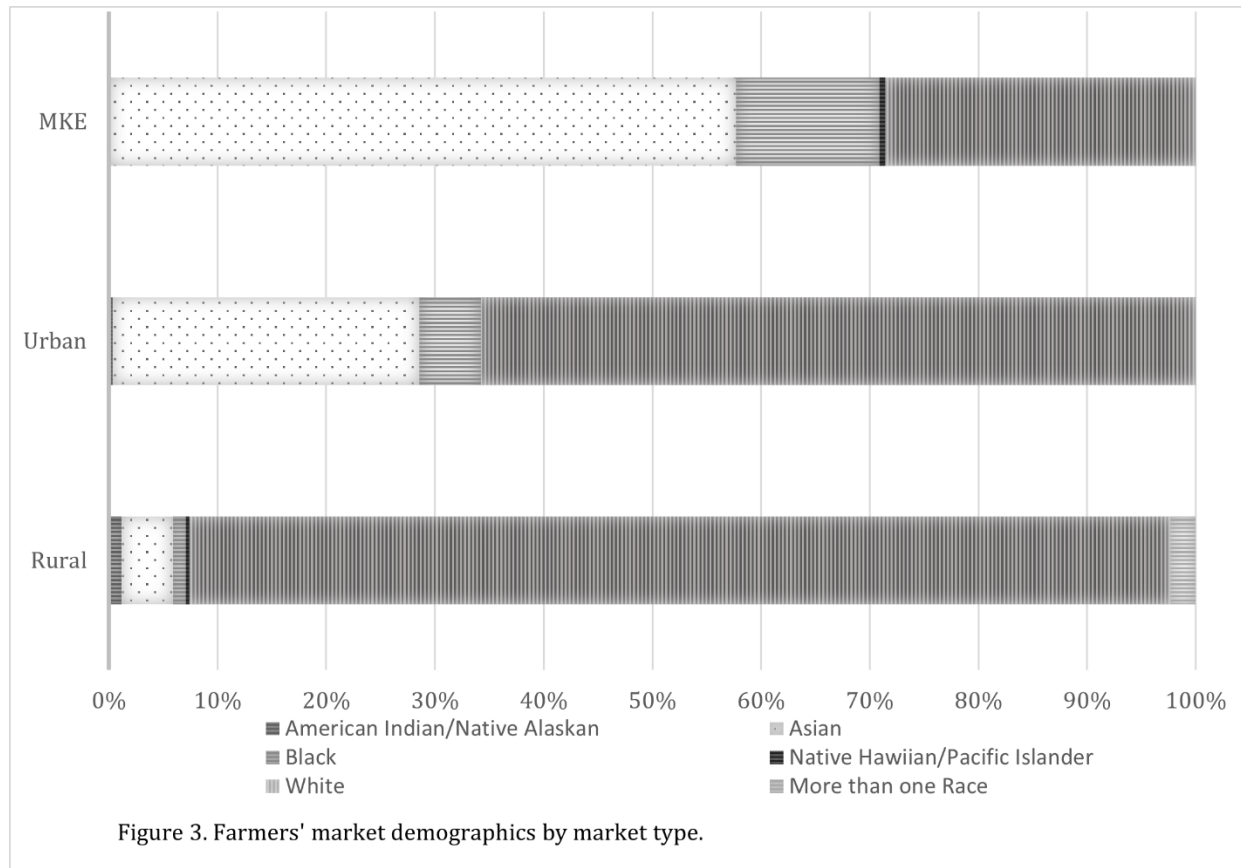
The structure of farmers’ markets in the State is diverse. Through the survey, researchers sought to understand the business structure, level of organization, susceptibility to risk, and vendor base in order to identify successful strategies for creating a stable market.

The size of a farmers’ markets tends to be related to the size of the population it serves. Farmers’ market vendors were broken into three categories – full season vendors, seasonal vendors, and occasional vendors. Full season vendors are present for the entire market season. The summer markets run from early May or June until the end of September or October, depending on the location and length of the growing season. Rural farmers’ market in the State averaged 21 full season vendors while urban markets averaged more than double that, with 46 vendors. Urban Milwaukee markets averaged 37 full season vendors per market day. Seasonal and occasional market vendors followed a similar trend with rural markets having seven, urban markets 19, and Milwaukee County markets eight. Occasional vendors may visit seldom or have short season products. These vendors differ by the area of the State. In the central part of Wisconsin, where processing vegetables are grown, excess products may glut markets for a week or two near the harvest for products like sweet corn, however in the southern part of the State, where markets are served mostly by direct market farmers, these types of vendors tend to sell short season products like asparagus and strawberries.

The types of vendors at farmers’ market around the State overall are similar, although the growing season is longer in the southern portion and near Lake Michigan. Market vendors also come from adjacent states to the south of Wisconsin (Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa) affecting the earliness with which produce can be found at the market. Fruit and vegetable vendors tend to make up about one-third of farmers’ markets (27-35%), meat 5-8%, dairy products 2-4%, baked goods 8-13%, value added agricultural products 12-14%, live plants 3-6%, and cut flowers 5-8%. The two vendor types where there is more variability is prepared foods and arts and crafts. Prepared foods are more common at Wisconsin urban market (9%) and especially Milwaukee County markets (13%) versus rural markets (7%). Arts and craft vendors are more common at rural farmers’ markets comprising 22% of the market vendors while urban markets have 8%.

Market managers were also asked to report the race and ethnicity demographics of vendors selling at the market. Most managers reported numbers, but some stated that they did not ask vendors for the information directly. As a result, these numbers are an imprecise reflection of the people selling at farmers’ markets. However, the reported data has provided direction to help identify underserved grower populations in the State.

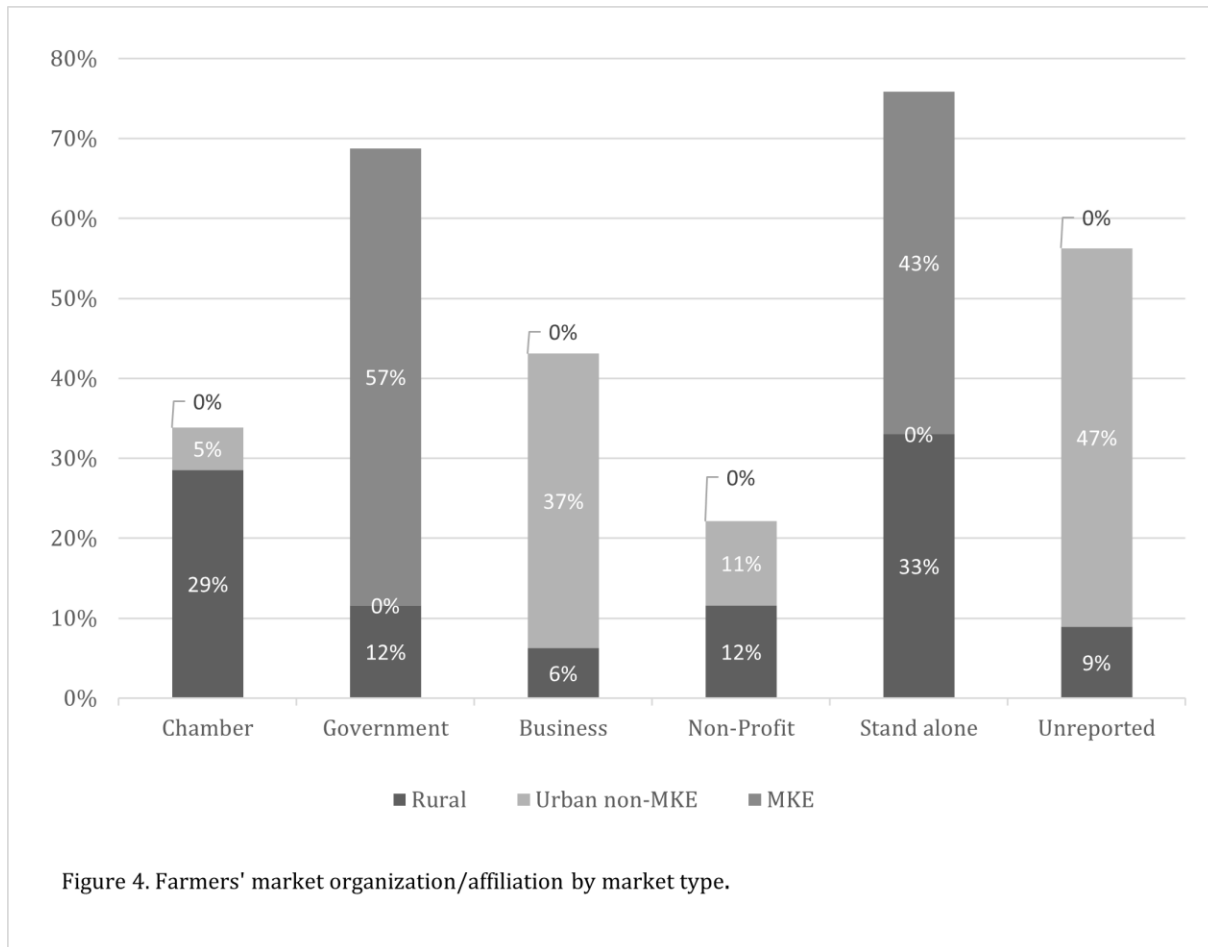
Rural market vendors tend to be white (90%), while urban markets have substantially fewer white vendors (66%). At Milwaukee County farmers' markets, white vendors comprise only 28% of the total. The second most common group selling at farmers' markets are Asian growers, predominantly HMoob (or Hmong) (Fig. 3). Wisconsin has the third highest percentage of Hmoob individuals, many of which were resettled in the United States because of their support of the US during the Vietnam War. Hmoob have a strong agricultural heritage and continued growing after emigrating. They are represented at most farmers' markets in the State. Asian growers make up 5% of producers at rural markets, 28% at urban markets, and 58% at Milwaukee County farmers' markets. Smaller percentages of Black vendors are found at Wisconsin markets with 1% rural, 6% urban, and 13% at Milwaukee County markets.



In addition to understanding vendors and market size, this researcher wanted to better understand the level of infrastructure present at each market. Since farmers' markets are not regulated or licensed in the State, they take a variety of forms. The survey asked markets about their business structure, budget, market rules, and insurance.

The organization structure of farmers' markets generally falls into five categories (Fig. 4). The most common is the stand-alone model where the farmers' market is not part of or affiliated with any other group or agency. Stand-alone markets comprise 33% of rural and 43% of Milwaukee County markets. None of the other urban markets were currently utilizing this model. The remaining markets that reported on their structure fell under what is referred to as an umbrella entity. This entity may provide different services for the market including insurance, music royalty licensing, not for profit status, and/or financial services. It may also employ the market staff. The most common of these was being under the auspices of a local government department or municipality. This model was the most common for Milwaukee County farmers' markets (57%). Urban markets outside of Milwaukee County tended to be affiliated with a business (37%) or a non-

profit (13%) as their umbrella entity. Rural markets were often affiliated with a business chamber, business improvement district, or similar entity (29%). Most markets in all three categories had market rules for their individual market (rural 67%, urban 84%, and Milwaukee County 100%). Ninety percent of farmers' markets reported having insurance for their farmers' markets in addition to vendor's having insurance of their own.



The status of farmers' market managers is also an important part of assessing farmers' markets. The status of market managers as paid or volunteer, the number of hours they devote to the position, and their rate of pay all speak to the role and value of farmers' market managers in Wisconsin.

Markets are managed by market vendors, community volunteers, government or not for profit employees, and market paid managers. Some markets chose to not respond to this question (22%), however, of the remaining markets, 40% of managers were volunteers and 38% were paid. Volunteer managers are much more common in rural areas where markets may not have funding or collect vendors fees. Half of rural managers reported not being paid, while 38% were compensated in some manner. Managers were paid an hourly rate, a daily rate, or by a seasonal stipend. Urban market managers that were paid (83%), were more often paid at an hourly rate. Only one Milwaukee County manager reported being a volunteer.

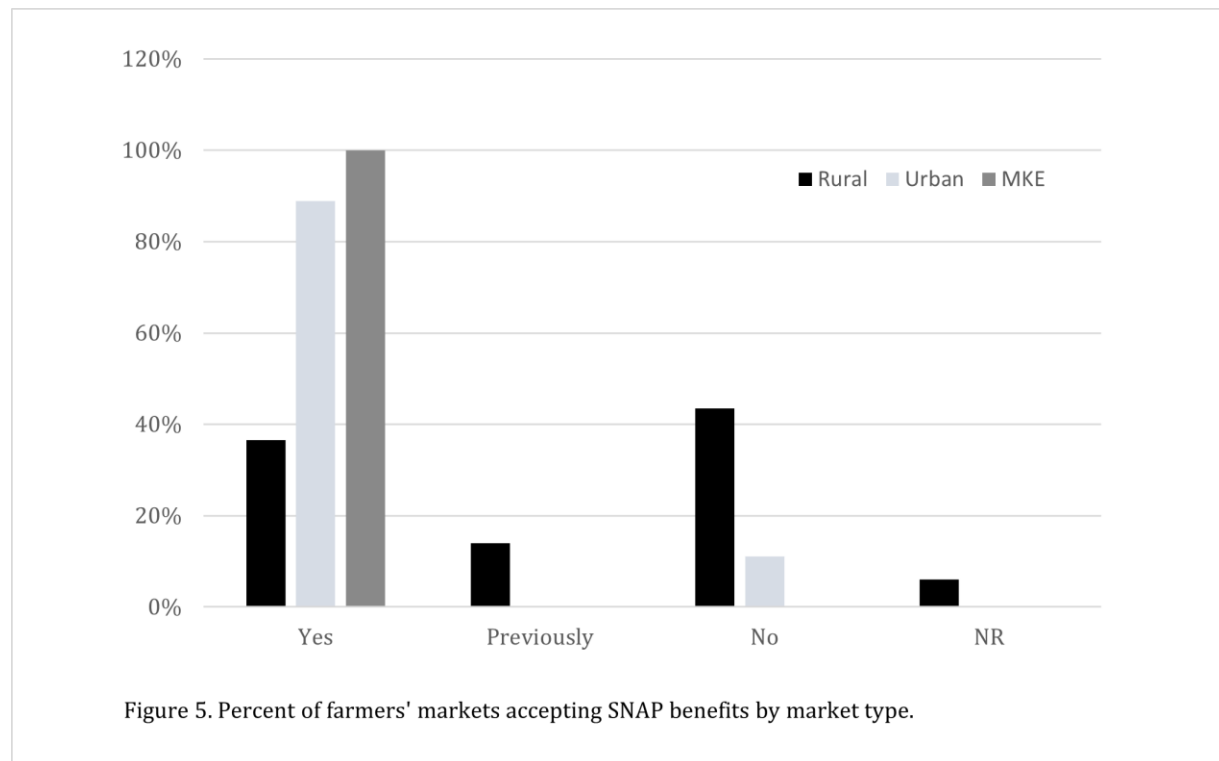
The number of hours worked supporting the market varied widely. Over half of all managers spent less than 20 hours per week on management tasks during the market season (rural 48%, urban 58%, Milwaukee County 57%). The remaining managers reported working from 21 to 40

hours a week on market tasks, except for 13% of rural managers, who report spending more than 40 hours a week supporting the farmer's market.

The survey asked managers to report their hourly rate. If the manager was not paid an hourly rate, they were asked to estimate an hourly rate based on the amount they were paid, and the hours worked completing managerial tasks. Managers reported making less than \$1 per hour to over \$40 per hour. Rural managers tended to be paid less than managers at urban markets. Many rural managers were paid less than \$15 per hour (43%), while only 14% of urban managers were paid at that rate. An additional 26% of rural managers were paid between \$15 and \$20 per hour and 14% up to \$25 per hour. Urban managers were paid at a higher rate with 21% paid up to \$20 per hour, 21% \$20 to \$25 per hour. The remaining 43% of urban market managers reported being paid more than \$25 per hour. Insufficient data was available from Milwaukee County markets.

Data was also collected on the acceptance of non-cash benefits at the farmers' markets. This included government issued benefits including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (previously referred to as food stamps), Farmers' Market Nutrition incentives for seniors, and Women and Infant children (WIC) (Fig. 5). In addition to government issued benefits, farmers' markets in Wisconsin have a wide array of nutrition incentive programs funded through grants and donations. Still others support wellness efforts and redeem fruit and vegetable vouchers for those participating in healthy activities regardless of financial status.

Since Wisconsin is currently transitioning its Farmers' Market Nutrition Program benefits to an electronic system and other programs are too varied to address here, this researcher has chosen to focus on SNAP redemption at the farmers' market. This means of payment for many, pays for the largest part of their food purchases and is relatively stable from year to year unlike match programs and other incentives in Wisconsin which tend to fluctuate from year to year and from market to market based on funding.



SNAP benefits are redeemed widely in the State. Federally funded programs have provided equipment and service for many Wisconsin farmers' markets over the past two decades. In Wisconsin, farmers' markets do not receive sustained funding for these expenses. This has caused some markets to discontinue offering this service in recent years. It is not surprising that farmers' markets in more densely populated areas with more SNAP participants are more likely to accept

benefits. All Milwaukee County farmers' markets that meet the eligibility requirements accept SNAP. Urban markets in the State have a similarly high rate of SNAP acceptance at 89%, and the rate is 37% for rural markets (Fig. 5). Some urban (11%) and rural (43%) markets have never accepted SNAP. However, some rural markets (15%) previously accepted SNAP but have discontinued the program (Fig. 5).

DISCUSSION

The markets in Milwaukee County comprise about 5% of the State's farmers' markets and operate in a unique environment. The population diversity, segregation, and poverty shift the typical expectations of a farmers' market and markets must adjust to the context of the place in the community they inhabit.

The structural elements of farmers' markets in Milwaukee County are strong. Managing the farmers' market is often part of a broader full-time position with higher rates of pay and benefits. This allows markets to retain managers for longer periods of time and attract qualified professionals working in this space. As managers gain experience and create relationships, they are often able to manage the market more efficiently and with greater success (Stevenson, Lev and Brewer, 2008).

The demographics of farmers' market vendors at these markets also reflect the market's ability to adapt to local needs. Many HMoob live and farm in the greater Milwaukee area, often in smaller spaces and rental gardens. Their operations have considerably lower infrastructure and transportation costs than many peri-urban and rural growers. They have a greater ability to charge modest prices at market and still be profitable. Since low-income customers value low prices to stretch their food dollars, this helps the market to attract an ample customer base. Having HMoob growers may also help to attract more customers of color (Taylor et al., 2022).

There are still opportunities for Milwaukee County farmers' markets to better serve their communities. Investigating ways to incorporate more vendors from within the Black and Hispanic communities may help to address poverty in the area, help customers to feel more welcome, and increase the word-of-mouth advertising that is so critical to market success (Witzling et al., 2019). Recruiting entrepreneurs from the area that have appropriate products or helping to mentor individuals into being a vendor can help to reinforce the community's involvement in the market. Customers can also be asked what products they would like to see at the market that aren't currently available (Larimore, 2017).

Milwaukee County farmers' markets are well positioned to increase access to healthy food and improve the consumption of fruits and vegetables. SNAP access is widely available to the over 240,000 SNAP participants in the County and those using SNAP at the farmers' market reported that it helped them to eat more servings of fruits and vegetables (Buchthal et al., 2018; Krokowski, 2011). Providing SNAP redemption is an important step; however, markets could also expand their customer base by helping customers feel more comfortable shopping there through vendor customer service and inclusion trainings, market ambassadors, or bring a friend to the market programs.

Other researchers have reported that the process of redeeming benefits isn't obvious or convenient (Aptekar, 2019; Greer et al., 2020). Finding ways to standardize the program across area markets and help SNAP users to understand and gain comfort with using their benefits there will increase redemption. Many participants were also unaware that they could use their benefits at the market. Increasing education about what eligible products can be found at the farmers' market, produce seasonality, and market location would help people better understand the market and how to feel successful shopping there (Grace et al., 2007; Larimore, 2017; Witzling et al., 2019).

Farmers' markets in Milwaukee County provide an essential food resource. The 16 markets in the County are geographically well distributed and provide many fresh produce and other healthy food options. They are stable markets with the ability to redeem benefits and incentives that are vital to low-income individuals trying to effectively spend their benefits. Many opportunities still exist for these markets to address nutritional disparities, provide economic opportunity, create community, and foster racial inclusion. With the proper funding levels, farmers' markets could move forward many important community goals.

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