

Toward Achieving Latino Food Equity:
Insights from Latino Community Leaders in Central Eastern Washington

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Abstract

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Latino Food Equity acknowledges the diverse cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence food access and consumption within the Latino community, promoting more inclusive and effective strategies to achieve food equity. This is a qualitative sub-study of the Food Research and Equity Collaborative (FrEsCo), and it aims to document the perception of community leaders in Central Eastern Washington on the role of their community-based organization in advancing Latino food equity. Twelve key informant, semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse community leaders and representatives of organizations working towards Latino food equity in the region, and the data were coded following the six steps of thematic analysis. The following four themes were identified: 1) The context in which community leaders and organizations operate, 2) Accessing food and resources for the Latino community is challenging, 3) Enhancing equitable access to food and resources for the Latino community, and 4) Opportunities and strengths of community-based organizations and the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington to advance Latino food equity. The findings reveal that addressing the lack of food access extends beyond food assistance, touching on many more factors including social, economic, legal, and geographical considerations. Community leaders highlighted the necessity for equal opportunities and respect for all Latinos. Overall, this study offers valuable insights into the complexities of addressing Latino food equity, which could inform the development of tailored interventions and policies.

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1 Introduction

Food equity advocates for the right of every individual, regardless of their identity or status, to access, cultivate, acquire, and consume nutritious, affordable, and culturally suitable foods.¹ This effort is not only about benefiting from the food system but also about empowering individuals to identify and address the inequities within it.¹ While the term “food equity” is broadly applicable and not specific to any particular community, this study will focus on the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington.

As of 2022, Washington state's Latino population stood at 1,139,944, constituting 14.5% of the total population.² This places Washington as the 12th state in the U.S. with the largest Latino population and 15th in terms of percentage.² The Latino population in Washington has experienced consistent growth, nearly doubling in size since the 1990s.² The highest concentrations of Latino residents are found in Eastern Washington, with Adams (65.3%), Franklin (55.3%), and Yakima (52.3%) counties boasting the highest shares.³ Currently, the prevalence of food insecurity – defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”⁴ in Washington State is 11.5%.⁵ However, counties within Washington with a higher proportion of Latinos such as Adams (15.7%), Franklin (13.4%), and Yakima (15.1%) have higher food insecurity rates than the state’s average.⁶ According to Feeding America, some of the root causes of food insecurity among Latinos include racism, discrimination, language and cultural barriers, and immigration challenges.⁷ The higher prevalence of food insecurity among Latinos is a barrier to achieving food equity. Ensuring food security is necessary for achieving food equity.

Previous research conducted across rural Latino communities in the U.S. has identified barriers and opportunities for achieving food equity. For example, Latino immigrants residing in rural Fresno, California, have expressed facing substantial obstacles in accessing food, including issues with transportation and a scarcity of grocery stores.⁸ Furthermore, in rural agricultural communities in Washington state, food access is dependent on seasonality,⁹ with produce access differing in summer versus winter, influencing what meals are prepared and consumed.¹⁰ Due to this, some communities have become resourceful by freezing produce from the summer season to be used for the winter season.¹¹ In addition to seasonality, communities in rural Washington

have expressed that access to food also depends on the quality, price, and locations of grocery stores or convenience stores.¹¹

Research suggests that governmental regional plans – which, among other things, focus on improving food affordability and access – could be used to promote food equity.¹² For example, Minnesota's Choose Health program improves food affordability and accessibility for low-income families by providing locally grown food through a regional food hub, benefiting both the families and the regional growers.¹² Another example is Grow NYC, a community-owned grocery store that has expanded access to fresh, affordable produce in New York City by partnering with 250 regional farmers and helping them stay in business by selling directly to city shoppers.¹² Lastly, the West Oakland Black Farmers' Market in California works to address the historical lack of nutritious food in Black neighborhoods due to the decline in Black farmers.¹² These examples highlight the need for the government to communicate with community leaders to support strategies for achieving food equity.¹²

One-way local governments and other important actors like researchers can work with community leaders and their communities is through community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR is a collaborative research approach in which all parties involved are viewed as equal.¹³ This involves recognizing the diverse contributions of researchers, community members, and organizations. When working with underserved communities and community leaders, CBPR can help mitigate any mistrust community members may have.¹³ The Latino community, in particular, often expresses mistrust of professionals or academic researchers due to their experiences with institutional racism and discrimination, including in the immigration system.¹⁴ Due to this mistrust, it has become difficult to have Latino participants in health research and interventions.¹⁴ However, CBPR helps decrease this mistrust as it engages the community as a unit of identity, integrates knowledge and action from the community, and promotes co-learning.¹⁴ CBPR facilitates more inclusive collaborations and equitable partnerships in all stages of research.¹⁴

The present study is a sub-study of The Food Research and Equity Collaborative (FrEsCo), which is an academic-community collaborative grounded in CBPR, focused on advancing Latino food equity in rural Washington. FrEsCo defines Latino Food Equity as “having access to food that is affordable, healthy, and culturally related, for all Latinos including those who work in the

food system. Latinos must have access to knowledge and skills to choose and prepare foods and freedom to express their cultural values and norms through their foods. Latinos must be protected and respected under the same rules and guidelines and be offered the same economic prosperity as everyone else.” This definition is crucial for this study as it recognizes the diverse cultural and socioeconomic factors influencing food access and consumption within the Latino community, promoting more inclusive and effective strategies to achieve food equity.

FrEsCo was established in 2022, hosting diverse organizations and leaders working toward Latino food equity in the region. FrEsCo was initiated with a mixed-methods formative study, conducted to document and explore community leaders' and organizations' perceptions, scope of work, and interest in participating in a Latino food equity collaborative. Key-informant interviews were conducted with diverse leaders and organizations in the region of Central Eastern Washington, which includes Yakima County, Benton County, and Franklin County. Additionally, secondary data from state and federal sources was used to determine contextual factors and regional dynamics that drive Latino food inequity. The sub-study presented here aims to document the perception of community leaders in Central Eastern Washington on the role of their community-based organization in advancing Latino food equity.

2 Methods

2.1 Setting and Study Design

Setting.

This study focused on rural Central Eastern Washington, including Yakima Valley/county, Benton County, and Franklin County. The data were collected between July 2022 and February 2023 by a research team from the University of Washington, Seattle.

Study Design.

This study is a secondary analysis of key-informant, semi-structured interviews conducted with diverse community leaders and representatives of organizations working towards Latino food equity in the region. The interviews documented these community leaders' and organization representatives' perceptions and experiences, with one of the goals being to identify opportunities and strengths in advancing Latino food equity in the region.

2.3 Participants and Recruitment

Participants.

The community leaders and organization representatives interviewed included executive directors of trusted local community-based organizations; an assistant to the director of agriculture of the region; directors managing community relations and social services; specialized professionals within labor industries; health communication and community health specialists focused on public health and nutrition programs (e.g., the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)); program coordinators and representatives from community support centers; and a director of nutrition services at a school district.

To be included in the study, participants had to: be 18 years of age or older, self-identify as Latino and/or as providing a service utilized by the Latino community (e.g. SNAP, located in rural Central Eastern Washington/Yakima Valley), or providing services to Latinos located in rural Central Eastern Washington/Yakima Valley (Yakima, Benton, Franklin counties).

Recruitment.

The co-principal investigators (co-PIs) of FrEsCo, one academic researcher and one community member, developed a list of organizations and leaders to contact for the study. The community co-PI, a trusted and longtime leader, sent emails to community leaders introducing the study and the academic co-PI, and inviting individuals to participate in the study. The study coordinator followed up with leaders and representatives interested in learning more about the study and determined eligibility. All leaders and organizations identified were contacted for an interview. Additional participants were identified using snowball sampling. The final list of organizations included was diverse. All recruitment happened by email and participants were screened and provided verbal consent before the interviews.

2.3 Data Collection

The semi-structured interview guide was co-developed with the academic researcher co-PI, one research coordinator, and one student researcher and grounded on the Context and Implementation of Complex Interventions (CICI) Framework, which is used for systematically assessing and presenting the context and implementation of complex interventions to understand how and why they work¹⁵ and included the following domains hypothesized to influence Latino food equity: geographical, epidemiological, socio-cultural, socio-economic, ethical, legal, and

political.¹⁵ The final interview guide is shown in **Table 1**. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and over the phone by two researchers from the University of Washington and one field coordinator from Radio KDNA.

2.4 Data Analysis

Transcription.

Twelve interviews were transcribed by one community researcher and two researchers from the University of Washington. All interviews were transcribed in their original language; 11 in English using rev.com and one in Spanish using happyscribe.com.^{16,17} Post transcription, the transcripts were anonymized and reviewed for accuracy.

Codebook Development and Analysis.

I coded the transcripts following the six steps of thematic analysis using the software Dedoose.^{18,19} Initially, I read all the transcripts to become familiar with the data. During this initial review, an initial coding scheme was developed using an inductive approach, with codes based on recurring significant features that aligned with the study's aim. These initial codes were then applied methodically to notable excerpts of the transcripts, focusing on aspects related to community services, food equity, and contextual factors. The codes were refined after reviewing and analyzing the data for patterns and redundancies, as well as examining the relationship between codes. A comprehensive codebook was finalized, defining each code and including examples from the data.

Transcripts were systematically coded until no new themes emerged, ensuring a thorough representation of data. Potential themes were identified and clustered into broader categories related to opportunities, strengths, and barriers to achieving Latino food equity. The themes were refined for consistency and coherence by comparing them against the dataset. Each theme was clearly defined to encapsulate the study's aim.

3 Results

3.1 Community Leader Characteristics

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders in rural Eastern Washington and the Yakima Valley between August 2022 through February 2023. After

excluding one interview due to the interview not being recorded, twelve (n=12) remained for analysis.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews Themes

The following four themes were identified from the semi-structured interviews: 1) The context in which community leaders and organizations operate, 2) Accessing food and resources for the Latino community is challenging, 3) Enhancing equitable access to food and resources for the Latino community, and 4) Opportunities and strengths of community-based organizations and the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington to advance Latino food equity. **Table 2** shows codes, code definitions, and supporting quotes organized by these four themes.

Theme 1. The context in which community leaders and organizations operate.

This theme encompasses the personal backgrounds of community leaders, the organizational contexts they operate within, and their perspectives on the Latino community. It explores how individual backgrounds, organizational cultures, and community viewpoints intersect and influence experiences and narratives. Across all semi-structured interviews, community leaders shared a similar Latino community perspective. They identified Latinos' needs, challenges, strengths, and cultural values. Many of the community leaders described Latinos as family-based, culturally proud, and resilient. Although these community leaders recognized the inequities the Latino communities face, they also noted that Latinos' strong resilience, optimism, and strong work ethic foster positive attitudes towards overcoming challenges. This makes it one of the Latino community's biggest strengths. As one community leader said, referring to Latino agricultural workers in particular:

“I would say they are very resilient. They go through so many challenges throughout the year and they never stop in spite of those challenges. So when there was the pandemic, lots of people just were able and fortunate, I include myself, to stay home and work from home and have our kids with us while we were juggling with school and work. Well, they can't. They still have to harvest fruit. They still have to be in the fields and risking their lives in the middle of a pandemic. If there is smoke, if there is hot weather, they are still there.” (CBO 23)

Moreover, community leaders identified food insecurity as a major concern among the Latino community, recognizing the importance of not only having enough food, but also having access

to culturally relevant foods and understanding how these foods can contribute to health. Interviewees also recognized that having access to food and resources such as transportation and nearby stores is essential for the community to achieve food equity. Given the challenges the community faces in accessing these necessities, the community leaders have utilized their professional roles within their organizations to offer support. From working in food banks, and health departments, providing legal services, or working in school food services, community leaders have merged their professionalism and their mutual values to support access to food and resources as an individual organization and with partnerships or collaborations with one another. As one community leader said:

“My role is food security. So right now what I'm doing is providing support to those families... in the Lower Valley and also in [inaudible] school district. But we provide gift cards or vouchers. ... Also, [as] mentioned before, it's about food security. So right now we're doing a program at [inaudible]. It's a computation program to teach families how to get into computers because a lot of people, even though everything is online, they don't know how to turn on the computer. So it's a really basic course that I'm doing right now with Mr. X to help families to be able to go into internet and find information about food security, food banks, their time that they're open, or maybe apply online for the PBT. All that kind of stuff.” (CBO 09)

Theme 2. Accessing food and resources for the Latino community is challenging.

Community leaders shared the various barriers Central Eastern Washington Latino communities face when accessing food and community resources. They expressed geographical limitations and socio-economic barriers as two main barriers to accessing food and resources like healthcare services, food assistance (e.g., food assistance programs such as SNAP), housing support, legal assistance, nutrition education, and social services. However, there was consensus among community leaders that transportation is a significant challenge. Many mentioned the distance to grocery stores like Fred Meyer or Walmart. They also identified that Yakima Valley is large, and the lack of public transportation makes it difficult to get to these grocery stores farther away. Additionally, the community leaders mentioned that those in the Latino community who walk to grocery stores are still unable to carry back many grocery bags. Further, many of the roads are not pedestrian-friendly, especially during the winter months. As one community leader shared:

“In our community it's certainly transportation. I know in our mid and lower valley we don't have public transportation. Here in the Yakima area in Union Gap, we do have the Union Gap Transportation, and the city of Yakima has transportation, but in the Lower Valley, there's no transportation services. So, walking to a grocery store for some people who don't have a vehicle is certainly going to be an issue for them, especially if you're shopping for more than one person.” (CBO 05).

Socio-economic barriers like low income, unemployment, and high cost of food and services impact food access. For example, community leaders noted that some individuals in the community, despite having access to a car, may lack the financial means to afford gas. This constraint hinders their ability to travel to grocery stores or attend medical appointments. Additionally, high rent prices, elevated water and electricity bills, and the expensive cost of food at grocery stores further amplify the challenge of accessing nutritious food. As one community leader expressed:

“They're able to make food choices based on their financial circumstance. And so that leads them to lower quality nutritional food because it's accessible to them at the moment. If they had a choice and they had resources, it's clear that they would choose different. And so I would say that the quality of food they access is influenced by their financial resources at the time.” (CBO 09)

A few community leaders also noted the rising costs in the Lower Valley, particularly when it comes to accessing fresh produce. These leaders recognize how important it is for the Latino community to learn some basic budgeting skills. Moreover, another significant barrier is the time required to search for and apply for available resources such as existing food assistance programs, housing support, legal assistance, and social services. The Latino community, in particular, faces long working hours, especially those working in agricultural fields from dawn to dusk, further complicating their ability to access food and the mentioned resources. Additionally, cultural, social, and linguistic factors, such as cultural stigmas, language barriers, and social norms, prevent individuals from accessing healthy foods or seeking and receiving services.

Lastly, community leaders recognized a lack of knowledge and awareness among the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington regarding nutrition education and available food

assistance. A few identified that community members were often unaware of different service programs or opportunities to purchase fresh produce. They mentioned various food assistance programs available, such as SNAP, SNAP Market Match produce programs, food banks, and other initiatives managed by Community Based Organizations (CBOs). However, community leaders also identified that some community members are hesitant to apply for governmental resources due to fear of deportation and concerns about their right to apply for citizenship. Often, participating in these programs does not impact immigration status, but poor advertising leaves the community uninformed. The absence of clear and accessible information exacerbates fears, further hindering access to much-needed resources and education.

Theme 3: Enhancing equitable access to food and resources for the Latino Community

Equitable access to food and resources like food assistance programs, healthcare, and legal support services are hindered by language barriers, gaps in nutrition and health knowledge, lack of trust and comfort, and poor information dissemination. Community leaders highlight the importance of effective and equitable communication strategies to ensure that the Latino community can access healthy foods and existing support services to food assistance programs, health care, and legal support. As noted by community leaders, language barriers, such as a lack of translated materials, limited multilingual services, and language proficiency among the community and community-based organizations, hinder this access. As one community leader expressed:

“I have yet to see any of those self-checkouts in different languages except English. That may discourage some of them from going to that grocery store, even though that grocery store has a lot of other products that Mexican families would buy, and healthy ones. I'm not saying anything bad about the small [Spanish 00:09:24] or the [Spanish 00:09:26] out there, but their selection is limited, and you're going to see a lot more foods that are not too healthy for you.” (CBO 01)

Moreover, there is a lack of awareness and education on nutrition and various health issues, including mental health and chronic diseases, as this information is not being disseminated equitably. Many of those in the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington who work in agriculture face mental health problems related to stress from financial constraints, long work hours, limited access to food, and difficulty supporting their families. Additionally, they often struggle with issues such as inadequate transportation and sexual harassment occurring at work.

For these reasons, some community leaders believe that there is a need for more education in Spanish related to various health concerns; however, one of the main concerns all community leaders agreed on was understanding the role of nutrition in health. Many mentioned that the Latino community lacks education on the value of different nutrients, nutrition, and health in general, how to prepare simple cultural recipes, how to prepare new foods, and how to grocery shop. As one community leader said:

“I think there's a lot of families that could use some help in understanding how do you cook lentils, even what is lentils?” (CBO 01)

Another community leader shared:

“And I think now we're seeing a huge change in terms of people not even knowing what is healthy. They see the advertisement, they're driven by the advertisements that we see. And so part of it, sugar and fast food and things like that, that we see, and I think that's part of the problem that we're encountering right now in the Latino community.” (CBO 03)

Limited knowledge about nutrition education and services for food access can result from poor information dissemination. The media and other communication channels play a critical role in spreading information about accessing healthy foods and resources like food assistance programs, healthcare, and legal support services, with factors such as the reach and effectiveness of media platforms, clarity, accessibility of information, and culturally relevant communication methods all playing a role. Community leaders identified various media and other communication channels to use. For example, working with local TV networks to present information in the evening time as that is a time that most of the Latino community watches the news. Another example is social media, specifically Facebook, to share information on events, programs, or where to access food. Most often the community will share information on the events seen on social media by word of mouth. However, community leaders mentioned that social media advertisements may make some feel skeptical due to their immigration status and eligibility to apply for food assistance programs, healthcare, and legal support services.

Some people may feel uncomfortable and distrustful when it comes to accessing food and resources. A couple of community leaders identified a need to strengthen the relationship between service providers and community members to ensure the perceived reliability and

credibility of information sources and enhance the overall sense of safety and support in accessing food assistance programs, healthcare, and legal support services. Community leaders identified that it is important to meet the community where they are. This may look like being present at their *tiendas* (stores) when sharing available resources, as these are familiar stores where the Latino community may feel more comfortable. Also, being present in their neighborhoods and partake in any of their events. As one community leader shared:

“You see when you go to the farms and you start talking to these people working in the fields, they open up to anyone immediately. When you talk about the challenges they face, when you talk about how do they feel in their day-to-day work, they open up and they tell you what is it that they are facing. And if you can offer a solution, they take it open... They are very open to take any suggestions, any advice that you might be giving. If you give them like, "We have this health fair planning plant here, and there's food available, and you will be able to learn how to cook quick and easy and healthy meals," they will take that offer.” (CBO 23)

The distribution of resources should be tailored to the community's needs, taking into account language barriers, trust, preferred communication methods, and access to specific technologies. Improved outreach and education efforts are crucial to ensure that the Latino community can fully utilize the available support without fear or uncertainty. Overall, ensuring this helps promote Latino food equity as it allows Latinos to have access to knowledge and skills to choose and prepare foods and freedom to express their cultural values and norms through their foods.

Theme 4: Opportunities and strengths of community-based organizations and the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington to advance Latino food equity.

Throughout the interviews, community leaders reached a high consensus that the main opportunity and strength to advance Latino food equity was ongoing collaborative efforts within the Latino community and between community-based organizations. Community leaders emphasized the significant positive impact of community partners in enhancing communication and implementing beneficial programs such as nutrition initiatives and food banks throughout the region. These partnerships have been valuable, especially in outreach and education efforts, as various community-based organizations can connect or refer community members to other available services. As one community leader said:

“So, maybe there are services, but the access is not.... So, yes, connect with organizations that are representing the community that they are trying to serve and that they know that they have context, that they have experience, that they know their community and that they really know, because there are a good number of organizations that may have good intentions, but those intentions are based on prejudices, for what they believe in. And, however, not to brag, but [CBO 11], as I told you, we come with experiences, we are day by day with them.” (CBO 11)

Community leaders have emphasized the importance of community partners, health workers, and *promotores* (community health workers) in engaging with Latino communities for outreach and education but acknowledge that significant barriers and a shortage of personnel exists.

Furthermore, this collaborative strength was perceived by community leaders to not only exist among community-based organizations but also in the Latino community at large. The Latino community is perceived to be family- and community-oriented, based on their significant cultural and social ties in the region. These include the sharing of rich cultural traditions, strong community cohesion, and social support systems, which could foster healthy food access and resource sharing. As a community leader shared:

“Again, not that I'm aware of anything that's been very visibly marketed from farm to market initiatives. But I think in a untraditional way, that a lot of people get their fruit from the farm directly to their house is whether agricultural workers are able to pick an additional [not captured 00:15:48] for themselves. And if they have a lot of cherries in a bucket or a lot of fruit that they gather for themselves, they'll distribute it to their friends, to their families.” (CBO 07)

Community leaders have recognized the strong desire among the community to address problems collectively. Parents, families, schools, teachers, and organizations rally together, showing resourcefulness and support despite challenges. This collective spirit and willingness to help highlight the community's resilience and commitment to each other. These collaborative efforts are a significant strength in advancing Latino food equity.

Moreover, a few community leaders indicated that community-based organizations could provide socio-economic opportunities to support the Latino community. These community leaders expressed that there is funding available, especially government funding, that could be used for meaningful purposes within the region. However, it does take community leaders and

community members to come together to use the right language to pull these funds together. One community leader shared an example:

“I would say COVID funds are a really good example. Benton County invested a ton of the ARPA and COVID support money back into businesses within Benton County, and they are working with the chamber to create small business loans, and grants.” (CBO 49)

Some community leaders also shared ideas on how to use funds from federal grants to better support the community. For example, utilizing empty lots to build neighborhood gardens, as seen in Detroit, which is well-suited for such initiatives due to its history of community farming. Alongside this, a community leader shared it is crucial to focus on educational pathways within agencies, breaking down barriers that prevent community members from applying for positions that can help further enrich food access initiatives. Empowering individuals, amplifying their voices, and ensuring they can seize and pass down opportunities will strengthen the community overall.

A community leader also acknowledged that accessing food and other relevant support programs like legal services, health services, and social services may be difficult for the Latino community due to geographic barriers. There are opportunities for community-based organizations to be able to go to the community members in the region instead of the community members having to go to them. Post-pandemic community-based organizations such as food pantries continued to deliver resources to many community members in the region. Other organizations can follow this example.

Overall, the strength and resilience of the community are evident through their collective efforts, resourcefulness, and support. By seeking to ensure affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant food access for all Latinos, empowering them with knowledge and skills, and advocating for equal protection and economic opportunities, the community showcases its commitment to advancing Latino food equity.

4 Discussion

This study aimed to capture the perspectives of community leaders in Central Eastern Washington on the role of their community-based organizations in promoting Latino food equity,

including opportunities and strengths in the community to advance Latino food equity. Findings from this study suggest that there are multilevel factors that community leaders deal with and recognize within their Latino community when it comes to advancing Latino food equity.

Community leaders expressed that food access extends beyond food assistance, touching on many more factors including social, economic, legal, and geographical considerations. Overall, this study suggests that organizations and leaders play an important role in facilitating access to food and resources like healthcare services, food assistance (e.g., food assistance programs such as SNAP), housing support, legal assistance, nutrition education (e.g., cooking classes), and social services to achieve Latino food equity. This is to ensure all Latinos, including food system workers, have access to affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant food, along with equal opportunities and respect.

In this study, community leaders shared unique perspectives of the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington, with many of them describing them as resilient, positive, and hardworking even though they also face significant challenges in accessing food and services like healthcare, housing support, legal assistance, and other social services. Barriers including limited transportation, long distances to grocery stores; low-income status, high cost of food; long working hours; language barriers, cultural stigmas and discrimination; and immigration status were all identified. These findings are similar to those reported in a study conducted among Latino immigrant households in four rural counties in Central California. The barriers to food access in the California study consisted of high food costs, lack of transportation, distance to grocery stores, food pantries not providing culturally suitable foods, immigration concerns, and legal status and discrimination.²⁰ Moreover, community leaders also identified that effective and equitable access to food and services is hindered by language differences, gaps in nutrition and health knowledge, lack of trust and comfort, and poor information dissemination. As the Latino population continues to grow in the U.S., so does the demand for Spanish-language food access services, health services, legal services, and other services.²¹ In terms of nutrition, a study conducted in a rural county in North Carolina found a similar concern. They found that food-insecure Latinas expressed the need for several services to access nutritious food, such as financial help buying quality food, education on how to prepare meals, and assistance with food access.²²

Furthermore, proper dissemination of information through different media sources, and building trust between providers and community members, was also emphasized in the present study. Some community leaders highlighted that language barriers create stigma and perceived discrimination within the Latino community, leading to feelings of embarrassment. This stigma and perceived discrimination lead to mistrust between community members and leaders, making it challenging to share information effectively through trusted media platforms. Previous studies have also identified that those in the Latino community feel stigmatized by the fear of being judged negatively by professionals when they seek support.²³ This study also identified collaborative efforts, desire and resourcefulness, sociocultural dynamics, and socioeconomic opportunities as the strengths and opportunities to advance Latino food equity in Central Eastern Washington. Similarly, a previous study conducted in Colorado identified that Latino households often utilize social networks for food-related support, such as coordinating transportation, sharing produce, and accessing cheaper groceries.²⁴

Moreover, it is important to note the current federal rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, such as the removal of equity action plans across federal agencies, threaten to undo the progress made toward addressing systemic racial and social inequities.²⁵ This impacts this study's aim of achieving Latino food equity by disrupting existing or in-development initiatives that focus on ensuring equal opportunities to access food and resources like food assistance programs, health care services, and social services.²⁵ This widens the gap in Latino food equity and leaves vulnerable populations such as the Latino community with even fewer abilities to deal with food insecurity.

This study offers valuable insights into the complexities of addressing Latino food equity which could inform the development of tailored interventions and policies for achieving Latino food equity. Collaborative efforts were the main strength identified by leaders, so working closely with community leaders and members to address community needs and priorities is essential for achieving Latino food equity, as collaboration builds trust, and it enables more meaningful and effective strategies. By collaboratively working together, this begins to advance Latino food equity as community members are involved in decision-making processes related to the development of tailored interventions and policies. Community members are more equipped to ensure these policies or initiatives are culturally responsive and sustainable for their community.

This study has strengths and limitations. The limitations are that the data collection occurred at one time and the results may fail to capture emerging issues or changes in community leaders' perspectives over time. Additionally, the study's focus on Central Eastern Washington limits the generalizability of findings to other geographic regions or cultural contexts, potentially overlooking unique challenges and opportunities faced by Latino communities elsewhere. In addition, I was the only coder analyzing this study which can lead to limitations such as subjectivity and lack of diverse perspectives.²⁶ A key strength of this study is the use of qualitative data, which provides great insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals. This enhances understanding and supports the development of culturally responsive and tailored policies and interventions. Additionally, qualitative data allowed me to uncover themes that might not have been apparent through other methods, lending depth and authenticity to the findings. By amplifying the voices of community leaders, this research shows the importance of local expertise and lived experience in shaping effective, equity-driven solutions.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study identified four themes summarizing the perspectives of community leaders on how their organizations may advance Latino food equity in Central Eastern Washington. The findings reveal that addressing the lack of food access extends beyond reducing food insecurity, touching on many more factors including social, economic, legal, and geographical considerations. Community leaders highlighted the necessity for equal opportunities and respect for all Latinos, including food system workers, to achieve Latino food equity.

The next steps following this study's findings include forming the food equity collaborative to advise research with Latinos in rural Central Eastern Washington. Further steps also include developing more culturally responsive nutrition initiatives such as nutrition education programs that respect and incorporate Latino cultural values, as well as advocating for policies that invest in transportation and support small local food retailers to improve access to fresh produce in rural areas. Additionally, while poor information dissemination was identified as a barrier, the strength of collaboration highlights opportunities for education and capacity building by training public health professionals and community leaders to address the unique needs of Latino populations with a focus on bilingual and bicultural competencies. All in all, conducting

longitudinal studies can also help assess the long-term impact of food equity interventions in Latino communities in Central Eastern Washington.

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Appendixes

Table 1. Interview guide for key informant semi-structured interviews with community-based organizations in the FrEsCo study.

<p><i>Verbal Consent</i></p>	<p>The University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center and Northwest Communities Education Center/Radio KDNA are partnering to lead this project through Dr. Barbara Baquero and Ms. Elizabeth Torres.</p> <p>We are conducting a research study to increase rural food equity in Yakima Valley and surrounding counties (Yakima, Benton, Franklin), along with gathering information about rural areas in Washington state.</p> <p>This is a pilot project funded by the University of Washington Population Health Initiative from July 2022-February 2023 to: establish an academic-community collaborative to advance Latino food equity in rural WA; and examine the contextual factors (e.g., geographical, social, cultural, economic, political) that would influence retail food settings for Latinos in rural WA.</p> <p>For today’s discussion, we will be chatting for 30-60 minutes. We will be discussing your experiences with Latino food and health.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Your participation is voluntary.● You can choose to skip any question or end the interview at any time.● There is no anticipated harm for participating in this interview or focus group, but you may feel uncomfortable at times.● While you may not directly benefit from this discussion, we hope that the information collected today will help us better understand perspectives on the rural food equity and Latino health. <p>Our conversation today will be recorded and the data will be stored in a secure location for the University of Washington study team to access. We will analyze your responses in aggregate with others to protect your privacy. Any information from this interview will be kept confidential to protect your privacy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Do you have any questions?● What points can I clarify for you?● Do you consent to this interview?
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<p><i>Opening</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Definition for Food Equity, Collaborative, and Community Engaged Research: Latino food equity means having access to food that is affordable, healthy, and culturally related, for all Latinos including those who work in the food system. Latinos must have access to knowledge and skills to choose and prepare foods and freedom to express their cultural values and norms through their foods. Latinos must be protected and respected under the same rules and guidelines and be offered the same economic prosperity as everyone else. ● Can you describe your organization? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: communities served, services offered to community or type of relationship with community, type of organization (such as CBO vs government, etc.)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can you describe your role at your organization? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: direct or indirect community work, general responsibilities and how they relate to community
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How would you describe the Latino community in your region? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: Have you been exposed to other Latino communities? What makes this community different?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are some concerns when you think about access to healthier foods for Latinos in your community?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What has worked in the past to improve access to healthier foods for Latinos in your community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you don't work with Latinos, what about the community you serve? ○ How does your role or your organization directly or indirectly engage in increasing access and purchasing of healthier foods for Latinos?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What community services exist in your community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: food-related programs, food banks, SNAP-ED, WIC

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the barriers to accessing community services (such as economic, geographic, or social and cultural barriers)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Economic barriers (define) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ability of stores/organizations to be able to afford offering programs ○ Geographic barriers (define) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Your surroundings in your community (travel/transportation, distance) ○ Social and cultural barriers (define) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reputation of community programs ■ Desire to access programs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the strengths of community resources?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the challenges to Latino health in the community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: discrimination, violence, ICE frequenting areas
<i>Closing</i>	<p>Collaborative definition:</p> <p>The Food Equity Collaborative is a cross-disciplinary group that will guide and support the promotion of healthier behaviors among Latinos and address long-standing social and economic factors impacting Latino food retailers in rural WA.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who are partners/key informants we should consider when building a food equity collaborative to support purchasing and consumption of healthier foods for Latinos in your community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PROBE: Traditional and non-traditional
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Would you be interested in being a part of a food equity collaborative to advise research with Latinos in your community?

Table 2. Themes, codes, code definitions, and supporting quotations from semi-structured interviews among rural Eastern Washington (Yakima Valley) community leaders.

Code	Definition	Supporting Quotations
Theme 1. The context in which community leaders and organizations operate.		
Community Leader Role	Captures the experiences of the community leaders, including their cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds. It highlights how these individual factors shape their perspectives and contributions to the Latino community.	“So my role is food security. So right now what I'm doing is providing support to those families, like [name] mentioned before in the Lower Valley and also in [inaudible 00:07:49] school district. But we provide gift cards of vouchers and also [inaudible 00:07:58] books, different kinds of books to support the students or to increase their reading for them. Also, like you mentioned before, it's about food security. So right now we're doing a program at [inaudible 00:08:18]. It's a computation program to teach families how to get into computers because a lot of people, even though everything is online, they don't know how to turn on the computer. So it's a really basic course that I'm doing right now with Mr. Casa to help families to be able to go into internet and find information about food security, food banks, their time that they're open, or maybe apply online for the PBT. All that kind of stuff.” (CBO 9)
Organizational Context	Captures the characteristics and culture of the organizations that community leaders are affiliated with. It includes aspects such as organizational mission, values, structure, and practices, as well as how these elements influence community leaders' roles and how they support the Latino Community in accessing foods and resources.	“We also do a soup kitchen. We do hot meals for our homeless. And we also have other people that come in, they're not just homeless, we have seniors that come and get a meal on Saturdays or we have families with little ones. So, we do that. We also work with the community, with the civic clubs, the school district, the Farm Workers Clinic to either help with the school supplies, help with clothing for the little ones in school or for families. We also do referrals if we need to, and we also work with partnership in different other, like we have done nutritional classes, workout classes, informational classes. So we partner within the organizations to serve as much as we can through our community.” (CBO 19)
Latino Community	It encompasses the views and experiences of the Latino community	“So I would say it's a very, very strong community. They have a very great sense of

<p>Perspective</p>	<p>as perceived by the community leaders. It includes insights into community needs, challenges, strengths, and cultural values.</p>	<p>family among each other. So that's something that I think it's very unique of the Latino community. It's very different from people that are from here, from the United States. I see people that are close together. They like to collaborate a lot, but the feeling that you get from the Latino community, it's completely different. It's that family feeling. Family is above everything. And when you have many coworkers that treat each other as family. So I think that's what makes them” (CBO 23)</p>
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Theme 2. Accessing food and resources for the Latino community is challenging.

<p>Geographical Barriers</p>	<p>The physical and locational challenges that hinder access to food and resources. It includes factors such as distance to grocery stores, lack of transportation, and the availability of services in remote or underserved areas.</p>	<p>“having access to food is not the same thing as having access to nutritious food, and so really providing better access, close access where they don't need to drive to get to the grocery store, the market, to buy their fresh fruits and vegetables and other less processed foods at a reasonable price. We know grocery prices are going up for everyone everywhere, so having access at a reasonable price would be key.” (CBO 49)</p>
<p>Socio-Cultural Barriers</p>	<p>Cultural, social, and linguistic factors that affect access to food and resources. It includes issues such as cultural stigmas, cultural discrimination, language barriers, and social norms that may prevent individuals from accessing healthy foods and seeking or receiving services.</p>	<p>“the USDA program is culturally appropriate as it could be, it's pretty restrictive on what you can purchase and what you can buy, and so that may not fit very well in some of our pathways, programs, childcare providers.” (CBO 49)</p>
<p>Socio-Economic Barriers</p>	<p>Financial constraints that limit access to food and resources. It includes factors such as income levels, employment status, cost of services, and economic policies that impact affordability and availability.</p>	<p>“it's that their financial resource limits them to have the food resources that are right for their family up to a certain part of the month. And then at some point those resources thin out. So I would describe a issue with accesses around families being on a shoestring budget at part of the month. When they're facing that aspect, then they're able to make food choices based on their financial circumstance. And so that leads them to lower quality nutritional food because it's accessible to them at the moment. If they had a choice and they had resources, it's clear that they would choose</p>

		different. And so I would say that the quality of food they access is influenced by their financial resources at the time.” (CBO 9)
Legal	Legal and regulatory obstacles that affect access to food and resources. It includes issues such as immigration status, legal documentation requirements, and policies that restrict eligibility for services.	<p>“También el temor de conectado a inmigración y en específico, la carga pública y siempre tener ese temor como inmigrante, no puedo recibir beneficios de ningún tipo, porque si hago eso, entonces, después me va a afectar con mi caso de inmigración. Entonces, todo eso también crea que las personas tengan todas esas barreras para acceder comida.” (CBO 11)</p> <p>Translated: “Also the fear of being connected to immigration and specifically, the public charge and always having that fear as an immigrant, I can't receive benefits of any kind, because if I do that, then later it's going to affect me with my immigration case. So, all of that also creates all those barriers for people to access food.” (CBO 11)</p>
Time	Time constraints that hinder access to food and resources. It includes factors such as limited service hours, School or work hours limiting time to prepare or access foods, service hours overlapping with work hours, and the time required to travel to purchase food or access services.	<p>“Oftentimes, summertime means that people are working longer hours. People who are in the fields, work from dawn to dusk, really. People who are working in those bodegas, that's when they have an influx of hours where they have to be there early, they get out late. So during those window periods, people can't really go to those events.” (CBO 7)</p>
Theme 3: Enhancing equitable access to food and resources for the Latino Community		
Nutrition and Overall Health Knowledge and Awareness Gaps	This involves limited access to nutrition education programs, cultural misconceptions about diet, lack of basic kitchen skills, and the impact of poor nutrition on overall health. Additionally, it includes a lack of understanding and education about various health issues, including mental health and chronic diseases, and the gaps in recognizing the importance of these health concerns and the available resources to address	<p>“Creo que también es importante recalcar que nuestra comunidad, como dices, anda muy a las carreras. El trabajo nos absorbe, ¿verdad? Nos absorbe y hay muy poco tiempo de cocinar. Creo que también es importante tomar tiempo y es también lo que hace falta, lo que yo veo que hace falta en la comunidad, más programas acerca de nutrición. De cómo poder preparar algo sencillo con algo barato, donde no solamente los niños, sino también los adultos se beneficien de su contenido</p>

	them.	nutricional.” (CBO 11)
Literacy Obstacles	Challenges related to language differences that hinder effective communication and access to food and resources. It includes issues such as the lack of translated materials, limited availability of multilingual services, and the impact of language proficiency on understanding and utilizing resources.	“And then I think making sure, again, when we talk about barriers, making sure that we're providing educational information that is created and distributed and is culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate materials. A lot of the people in our community don't have maybe above a fourth grade reading level or fifth grade reading level. And then even then some people may not be able to read at all. And so making sure that if you're providing information that it's not only in the correct language and linguistically appropriate, but it's at a reading level or sometimes images are stronger and make more sense for some people than a paragraph of words.” (CBO 5)
Media and Information Dissemination	Limited knowledge about available resources and services can result from poor information dissemination and insufficient outreach efforts. The media and other communication channels play a critical role in spreading information about accessing healthy foods and resources, with factors such as the reach and effectiveness of media platforms, clarity, accessibility of information, and culturally relevant communication methods all playing a role.	“But aside from that, I think for tienditas, again, I don't think I can really answer that, but I would say maybe radio still, TV, traditional broadcasting is very important still. And social media, I guess it would kind of depend on your audience, right? If it's the children in the household, they can relay the message. And I guess children are also trusted sources of information because depending on, again, the household language preferences, sometimes the younger kids are the ones that are communicating important messages to the parents. And I mean, parents may have the time to look into it a little bit further, but they take their children's word for true sometimes and I think that's also something to consider with anything that you'd like to do.” (CBO 7)
Trust and Comfort	The importance of trust and comfort in the communication and distribution of resources to access healthy foods. It includes factors such as the relationship between service providers and community members, the perceived reliability and credibility of information sources, and the overall sense of safety and support in accessing healthy foods and resources.	“Comfort zone. We have a lot of Latin community here that only visit the tienditas because they know that they're going to understand the language, they're going to be talked to in that language, they're probably going to have the vegetables and fruits and foods that are culturally appropriate, and they don't go to Safeway or Albertsons because it's either not available or they don't feel comfortable because they don't speak the language. So, there's a lot of those

		<p>barriers that we find very interesting. Then the smaller tiendas or small business owners that struggle to keep their stores going, and so I would kind of coincide with what these ladies were just saying.” (CBO 49)</p>
<p>Theme 4: Opportunities and strengths of community-based organizations and the Latino community in Central Eastern Washington to advance Latino food equity.</p>		
<p>Collaboration</p>	<p>Collaborative efforts within the Latino community and between organizations to improve access to healthy foods and resources. It includes partnerships, networks, and collective actions that enhance resource distribution and community support.</p>	<p>“Yeah, so we have an agency partner called Second Harvest, and they're one of our community partners that send us flyers and keep in communication where they're having their local food banks, and they have them all over our cities, and they're always having them... They don't ask for identification, you just pull up, you can say there's two families, and they hand you boxes in food. It's been around, but during COVID, it was really they were having events everywhere, and they continue to do this Mobile Market food distribution. So, they're in Prosser, Kennewick, Pasco, everywhere, and they even send us some in other counties, which I usually will send out to connected partners like at other LHJs, to share. So, a lot of communication there. But, they are a mobile, and the nice part is is they don't ask for identification. All they want to know if it's one family, two families, so that it makes it for easier access.” (SI 49)</p>
<p>Socio-Cultural Dynamics</p>	<p>Cultural and social strengths that contribute to resource and food accessibility within the Latino community. It includes aspects such as cultural traditions, community cohesion, and social support systems that promote healthy food access and resource sharing.</p>	<p>“And then the other component is the type of work we do is we provide food cards to the grocery store so that they have full choice to select the things that they want to select. When we do provide food staples, we provide things that are culturally relevant. So sometimes we access food from Northwest Harvest and things that we request are culturally relevant foods. The one gap I would say that people request that they don't have readily access for either in a food bank or any of these distribution sites are things that families need to make a food familiar to them. So the spices, the condiments, those types of things are not readily available as an item in a food bank.” (CBO 9)</p>

<p>Socio-economic Opportunities and strengths</p>	<p>Economic strengths and resourcefulness of the Latino community in accessing healthy foods and resources. It includes factors such as economic resilience, entrepreneurial initiatives, and the ability to leverage available resources effectively.</p>	<p>“But I think if you have some sort of support, I don't really know who would be the adequate person to, but if you can help them create an economic plan, I think that can be something that can motivate them to implement the intervention. And again, I know I think probably Dr. [inaudible 00:24:47] has implemented just even printing out new images of fruits and vegetables, [inaudible 00:24:53] the market has been successful. Even something like that, presentation is also very important. So I would just truly recommend marketing and economic, how to help them plan that and see the value to it, because it's an investment, right? So, I think that would be important for the business owner because ultimately, they're business owners.” (CBO 7)</p>
<p>Desire & Resourcefulness</p>	<p>The innovative utilization of available resources by community leaders and the Latino community to ensure equitable access to food and resources and desire for impactful change.</p>	<p>“Well, I think we can definitely say from a collective impact perspective, because we've been doing the work we've encountered more so I think it's the norm that people want to help, organizations want to solve this problem. Community members rally with and for each other, there's a lot of desire to solve this issue. I think parents, families, schools, teachers, folks are generally recognizing that this is a concern and it has impacts and implications. And for the most part, people aren't, whatever scarcity they're experiencing, they're not limited to that. They're much bigger and greater than that. And so having access to foods because of the agriculture will vary by season. But I think folks are definitely resourceful and they try to help each other out as much as their resources allow.” (CBO 09)</p>