FERTILE GROUND
A Film About Food Access in Mississippi
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**

Discussion Guide Overview  3

Why “Fertile Ground”  4

**Film Themes**

Urban design and Infrastructure  5

Food Options and White Flight  6

Fast Food Convenience  7

Recidivism and Hunger  8

Food in Schools  9

Farming and Urban Agriculture  10

Chefs and Local Ingredients  11

Future of Food in Cities  12

**Discussion Questions**  13

**Take Action**  14

**Local Resources**  15

**Special Thanks**  17

Made Possible by:
Discussion Guide Overview

Jackson, Mississippi

The discussion guide on the Fertile Ground documentary is part of the City of Jackson’s effort to inform and encourage citizens, businesses, and leaders to promote sustainable and ethical food policies in Mississippi. We hope the discussion guide serves as a tool for you and your community to start a conversation about how we can create more food secure communities within our city. Whether you are screening the documentary with a small group, online, or at schools use this guide to help start the conversation. Please share your watch party photos online and tag #fertilegroundjxn for us to re-post.
Why “Fertile Ground”?

“This project is so important because we live in abundance, but we operate from a place of scarcity and in our society there is no justification for anyone to go hungry or anyone to not have access to healthy food options. In many respects, food is love in our communities. Food is a reflection of how we demonstrate our appreciation for people. And, in spaces where people have very little to offer, food is one of the few things that they can give you to demonstrate their love and appreciation for you. And so, as a city we should return the love and show our citizens that we want them to have an abundance of healthy food alternatives.”

Chokwe Antar Lumumba,
City of Jackson Mayor

Mississippi has a complex relationship with food. During slavery and share-cropping periods food was used as a tool of control. Today urban food swamps and food deserts are another form of control. “Big Food” controls most of the Mississippi food system, showcasing itself through convenience store fast food urbanism and mono-cultural landscapes.

The documentary is part of a larger initiative called “Fertile Ground: Inspiring Dialogue about Food Access”, which uses public art as a medium to inspire dialogue about food access in Jackson, Mississippi. The City of Jackson was awarded the grant from the Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge in November 2018. The Department of Planning and Development is using the Fertile Ground Project as a research tool to better inform policy decisions, community engagement, and future development for delivering better urban food access.

The documentary team is comprised of home-grown Mississippi talent including:
Executive Producer - Robby Piantanida
Director - Alex Warren
Director of Photography - Aaron Phillips
Producer - Jocephus “Skipp” Martin
Producer - Salam Rida
Producer - Travis Crabtree
Sound Mixer - Taiwo Gaynor
Music - Tyler Tadlock
Music - Victor Piantanida
Set Photographer - Drew Dempsey

“The Public Art Challenge is designed to strengthen communities like Jackson with moving works of art that highlight complex problems - and foster public discussion about solutions. Fertile Ground does just that, telling the story of a city that has too few healthy food options. It’s also the story of people – like Mayor Lumumba, artists, farmers, urban planners, and other local leaders – who are creating new opportunities to deliver better options. As the Coronavirus proves especially dangerous for those with underlying health conditions, and as African-American communities suffer the highest death rates, Fertile Ground has taken on new power and urgency.”

Mike Bloomberg, founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies, former Mayor of New York City
Film Themes:

*Urban Design and Infrastructure*

“The expansion of Jackson and its sprawling nature creates a lot of accessibility issues.”

-Travis Crabtree, City of Jackson Urban Designer

When the City of Jackson Planning Department initially started doing research on food insecurity within the city it was discovered that 65% of Jackson is a food desert (73 sq. miles of 113 sq. miles). This map illustration represents the geographical coverage that is considered a USDA food desert in Jackson. This map shows where residents are low income and are more than half a mile away from a grocery store and where there are extremely low car ownership levels. The census tract layers are based off of 2015 USDA census data.

Jackson has over 70 fast food restaurants, 60 convenience stores, and 150 gas stations. This map illustration represents the geographical coverage of all of those locations with a quarter mile buffer around them. We use a quarter mile because that is a 5 minute walk to get to a destination from where people are living, making it extremely convenient.

Jackson lacks access to fresh food sources. This map illustration represents a quarter mile buffer around all of the farmers markets, grocery stores, and fresh food sources in the city. The city only has around 20 grocery stores and many of them lack fresh produce. Less than 5% of them contain locally grown fresh produce.

- **Food Desert**: an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food.
- **Food Swamp**: an area where an abundance of fast food, junk food, convenience stores, and liquor stores outnumber healthy food options.
- **Food Oasis**: an area with higher access to farmers markets, supermarkets or vegetable shops with fresh foods.
Film Themes:

Food Options and White Flight

“What happens in South Jackson is what happens everywhere (right). We have white flight and then you have economic flight. And then after you have that, then it just gets abandoned. Some communities are deemed better than others or more valuable than others, those people kinda get better access to food. They don’t give black people access to healthier institutions.”

Joecephus “Skipp” Martin, Artist and activist

Referenced in the film is the closing of several grocery store chains. The Kroger at Raymond Rd and McDowell Rd closed in September 2007 and a second Kroger on Terry Rd in South Jackson closed in February 2015. Both times the grocery chain cited financial reasons for its closure.

Food deserts originated with the urban “white flight” of the 1960s and 1970s. According to PolicyLink, a national non-profit focused on social and economic inequities, when white, middle-class residents left cities for the suburbs, grocery stores followed. In urban communities the nearest grocery store is twice as far as the nearest fast-food restaurant.

Nationally, low-income neighborhoods have 30 percent fewer supermarkets than higher-income neighborhoods. The problem isn’t only in urban areas; food deserts are also common in rural communities. Geography, poverty, and race matter when it comes to having healthy food options.

Jackson resident Kenny Harris on his way to go grocery shopping.
**Film Themes:**

*Fast Food Convenience*

“Fast food chains exist because it’s cheap, it’s convenient, and it’s addictive. It’s profitable for big corporations because it’s so efficient.”

*Salam Rida,*  
*City of Jackson Urban Designer*

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In the city of Jackson there are over 70 fast food restaurants, 60 convenience stores, and 150 gas stations (based on Google Maps, 2019). Across the country families are forced to do their food shopping in convenience stores stocked with highly processed, fatty food with low nutritional value or purchase food from fast food chains. Instead of having to spend time in your kitchen and at a grocery store preparing a meal you can spend mere minutes at a fast food restaurant and get a cheap meal that fills up a family. One of the main reasons for the popularity of fast food is how convenient and attractive it is to people regardless of their racial background or economic class. The amount of time, cost, and convenience is enticing to people, but what are the hidden costs? It is no coincidence that our country’s health has been declining as fast food consumption has been increasing.
Film Themes:

Recidivism and Hunger

“Food insecurity is the result of a human created system of segregation that relegate some people to food opulence, primarily privileged, white members of our community. And relegates others to food scarcity and primarily communities of color and black Jacksonians.”

Madeline Morcelle, Attorney and activist

It was up until 2019 that Mississippi and 2 other states (West Virginia and South Carolina) operated under the federal lifetime SNAP/TANF drug felony ban. The federal ban disproportionately harms women and their children and can prevent reunification after incarceration. By supporting successful re-entry, SNAP/TANF reduce recidivism and its significant costs to the criminal justice and foster care systems. The federal ban exclusively punishes people with drug felonies, including non-violent offenses like possession. Many were convicted while struggling with a substance use disorder and before diversion programs and drug courts were established. The SNAP/TANF drug felony ban exacerbates the impacts on hunger, economic instability, and unemployment, which is contrary to the key mission of drug courts and other programs to support successful reentry and recovery.

In July 2019 the Mississippi Legislature passed House Bill 1352, the Criminal Justice Reform Act, that allows as many as 67,000 Mississippians with felony drug convictions to become eligible for federal food assistance, a step in the direction of building food security.
Film Themes:  

Food in Schools

“You have, often times, poor performing schools because kids are not getting the basic needs to perform well in schools. There is no motivation greater than not being hungry right now.”

Melishia Brooks,  
Community Organizer

Eating a healthy diet helps children stay alert during class, fight off illnesses, and grow into healthy adults. School children get up to half the food they need each day at school, which makes school meals an important place for learning healthy eating habits. It is critical for school food policies to help schools provide children with foods and drinks that are part of a healthy and nutritious diet.

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide complete meals to millions of American children every day. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires the meals served by these programs to be healthy and nutritious. However, many schools continue to receive budget cuts that impact their food budgets, especially schools in under-served communities.

It is extremely important to prioritize health and wellness in public schools environments. Working with local farmers can help establish local food policy standards within our public school systems. This would encourage our communities to improve child nutrition, support local farmers and economies, and increase food and nutrition education.
Film Themes:  
Farming and Urban Agriculture

“If you were able to just put a fraction of the land into production, then you would fundamentally change what food access looks like within the city.”

Sam Humphrey,  
Urban farmer

The City of Jackson has an abundance of vacant land that is publicly and privately owned. Urban agriculture is a land-use that can make the land productive, feed communities, create new opportunities for entrepreneurship and jobs, and contribute to the creation of a local circular economy. Urban agriculture can vary in size, mission, and scale including community gardens, learning gardens, demonstration farms, edible landscapes, and medical research farms. Food can be grown in vacant lots, patios, rooftops, street medians, indoors, and even in shipping containers.

Urban gardens can help promote economic development and community activism. Growing food closer to home and where people need it just makes sense. As an integral part of community food systems, urban farming plays an important role in food system planning. It allows people to reconnect with their food, reduces numbers of miles travelled, carbon emissions associated with transportation, and can help eliminate food deserts. In several studies of urban farms, it has been shown that growing food can also improve social cohesion, physical wellness, and mental wellness.
Film Themes:

Chefs and Local Ingredients

“It’s not just about growing the food here, it’s about the whole system of what it takes to grow food.”

Dr. Cindy Ayers, Urban farmer

Many chefs prioritize purchasing from local farmers to connect back to the land and incorporate food as a form of healing and community development. Chef Enrika Williams is inspired by how food can pay homage to southern black women for preserving the cultural food ways of the south. Being able to grow the food locally and use it in her menu helps her express how a chef can influence dinner conversations and expand the culinary landscape around the table.

With an increase in urban farming and urban agriculture more farmers are working with local chefs to support each other. The farm to table movement has allowed many farmers to work directly with chefs and even grow plants specifically for their menu. By supporting this local circular economy both the chefs and farmers can mutually benefit from one another.

Chef Enrika Williams at the Mississippi Farmers Market on High Street.
Film Themes:

Future of Food in Cities

“Food should not be a product, it shouldn’t be just a consumption, sort of tool, it should be a cultural and community tool. And we’re moving farther from that if we continue to treat it like a product or an industry.”

Travis Crabtree,
City of Jackson Urban Designer

The future of food in cities will focus around creating localized cooperative food systems that are racially, culturally, economically, and environmentally equitable. We need to invest in the next generation of food and farming entrepreneurs to start businesses and augment existing businesses within our city. We need to expand African American entrepreneurship and create green job opportunities that inspire dignity and disseminate power.

We need cooperation among food and farming businesses to work together to create a culture that builds with one another and challenges each other to be more equitable and sustainable.

These businesses can develop interdisciplinary relationships together that can feed our city and take on the industrial food complex.

We need to develop regenerative systems that go beyond the standards of sustainability. We need systems that combat climate change, that are zero waste and carbon negative, that build health back into the landscape, that redevelop neighborhoods with healthy food options, that providing underserved communities with economic prosperity.

Lets get to work.

Aerial image of Foot Print Farms.

Jocephus “Skipp” Martin in South Jackson.
discussion questions

1. Urban sprawl refers to the unrestricted growth in many urban areas of housing, commercial development, and roads over large expanses of land. From the film, what are some of the impacts of urban sprawl? What are some of the causes of urban sprawl? (develop a chart or visual)

2. Think about how you get food on a daily basis. How do you get to the grocery store? Is transportation for shopping a problem? How long does it take you to get there? What influences the number of times you shop?


4. Were you surprised by the connections between food insecurity and local crime? Were you surprised by the connections of food insecurity and school performance? Why or why not?

5. From watching the film, what are the impacts of food insecurity on the health of individuals in Mississippi? How about the economy?

6. What are some of the hidden costs of factory farming you can think of that don’t show up in the price of food at the checkout line?

7. Picture a local food system. What does it look like? How big is it? Who works there? What kinds of plants and animals are being raised? What kinds of tools does the community use?

8. What are the next action steps to fixing the issues with food access in Jackson? Who are the stakeholders that should be involved? City officials? The members of Jackson? Farmers? Explain why.

9. How can the messages in this film be transferred to tackling food deserts in low-income communities like Jackson? Do you have a better sense of how green infrastructure supports local food? Why or why not?

10. From watching the film, how do you feel inspired to solve the issue with food insecurity and local agriculture? Are you more informed about community-supported agriculture programs? Why or why not?
One of the goals of the Fertile Ground project is to inspire action and policy change around food insecurity. It is widely believed that current food systems cannot sustainably meet the growing food demands of cities. We need transformative change to nourish people sustainably, while simultaneously preserving and restoring our ecosystems with dignity and respect for each other. People across the country are coming together to combat food access issues within their communities. Communities across the country share similar food insecurity challenges, below is a list of things you can do in your community to help combat food insecurity in Jackson.

- Demand action from your local, state, and federal representatives.
- Get involved in policy-making process.
- Make changes to your daily life that support local farmers and producers.
- Donate or volunteer with a local organization that work on food insecurity.
- Adopt a greener lifestyle, here.
- Sign the petition to abolish the Mississippi Grocery Tax, here.

**About the Mississippi Grocery Tax**
Mississippi is one of only three states without a tax break on food for home consumption (groceries). Of those states (MS, South Dakota, Alabama), Mississippi assesses the highest general sales tax on groceries. MS’ grocery tax is fiscally irresponsible. It harms local economies by reducing consumer purchasing power, which suppresses economic opportunities for grocers, farmers, and their employees. It also keeps low-income families from the food they need, worsening hunger and related public health challenges. Learn more about the impact of the grocery tax here.

**Recommendation from MCJ**
Voters overwhelmingly support grocery tax reform. An April 2019 Millsaps College/Chism Strategies poll found that 69 percent of voters believe that Mississippi should change how it taxes groceries. Consequently, the Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) urges the Mississippi Legislature to enact legislation that ends the sales tax on groceries. MCJ also urges the legislature to offset resulting losses in state revenue through tax alternatives, such as tobacco, gas, and income tax increases. In 2020, we endorse H.B. 1079, sponsored by Representative Robert Johnson III (H.D. 94) and H.B. 789, sponsored by Representative Jeremey Anderson (H.D. 110).
local resources

Mississippi Food Network

Mississippi Food Network (MFN) has been feeding Mississippians since 1984. MFN distributes more than 1.5 million pounds of food and feeds more than 150,000 every month — or a total of 1.8 million people per year. MFN takes donations and distributes food and goods through 430 member agencies.

Mississippi Food Policy Council

The mission of the MS Food Policy Council is to advocate for equitable food and farm policies that build healthy communities and strengthen local food systems.

Springboard to Opportunities

Springboard To Opportunities connects families living in affordable housing with resources and programs that help them advance themselves in school, work and life. We do this by working directly with families, as well as by establishing strategic partnerships with other organizations that help residents achieve their goals.

The Lighthouse | Black Girl Projects

The Lighthouse | Black Girl Projects’ mission is to be a revelatory, unflickering light for Black girls and young women in the south-eastern United States through focused programming and by creating spaces of solidarity and safety for them.
**Stewpot Community Services**

The goal of Stewpot has been to promote, develop, stimulate and encourage physical and spiritual development by providing nutritious meals to the community. The Stewpot kitchen was a success almost instantly. The Community Kitchen provides a noontime meal to anyone—no questions asked—seven days a week, 365 days a year. In 1982, the success of the soup kitchen inspired the establishment of a Food Pantry. This mini-grocery store provides a four-day emergency supply of food for carefully screened applicants.

**Good Samaritan Center**

The Good Samaritan Center’s mission is to assist families and individuals in emergency situations. We work closely with other organizations to form a “network of helping hands.” Our motto is “if we can’t help, we should know (or be able to find out) who can.”

**Sow Reap Feed**

Sow Reap Feed is a non-profit organization strengthening hungry communities by rebuilding their access to and understanding of healthy foods.

**Boys and Girls Club - Central MS**

Since 1936, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Mississippi (BGCCM) have provided after-school and summer youth development programs for at-risk children in the Jackson Metro Area. Our kids spent about 750,000 hours at Club facilities last year, learning new life skills and values that will serve them for a lifetime.

**Operation Shoestring**

Investing in the hearts and minds of our children and their families to promote health and self-sufficiency, and faithfully extending the hand of hope and opportunity to empower the needy, uplift our target neighborhoods and the larger community, and brighten the future for us all.
special thanks

Thanks to all those who shared their stories and experiences with us. We value your trust and time.

Kenny Harris / Jackson Resident
Travis Crabtree / Urban Designer
Shamb’e Jones / Activist, Artist
Ronnie Crudup Jr. / Mississippi House Representative
Joecephus “Skipp” Martin / Activist, Filmmaker
Salam Rida / Urban Designer
Melishia Brooks / Community Organizer
Chokwe Antar Lumumba / Mayor of Jackson
Madeline Morcelle / Attorney
Dr. Cindy Ayers / Urban Farmer
Otis Wright Jr. / Urban Farmer
Matt Casteel / Worm Farmer
Sam Humphrey / Urban Farmer
Enrika Williams / Chef
DJ Baker / Urban Farmer
Derek Emerson / Chef

City of Jackson, urban farmers of Jackson, State Representative Ronnie Crudup & family, The MS Farmers Market, Jackson Medical Mall, The Gaynor Family, Don Warren, and to all those living in Mississippi.