

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN ISSUE BRIEF



ISSUE: *Racial Equity in the Vermont Food System*

What's At Stake?

Vermont must work towards racial equity in its food system in order to make the food system truly sustainable for everyone. Equity is “the condition that would be achieved when a person’s race... is no longer predictive of that person’s life outcomes.”¹ While food and agriculture can be a source of justice and equity for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities, the Vermont food system is built on hundreds of years of marginalization and inequity. As a result, BIPOC communities experience entrenched and varied challenges throughout the food system. Vermont must build racial equity into all areas of its food system, including processes, structures, initiatives, and practices. Creating a truly sustainable local food system requires more equitable solutions developed by and for BIPOC communities.

Current Conditions

Inequities exist throughout Vermont’s food system, from land and farming to food security, the workforce, and beyond. Some of these inequities are rooted in the history and policies that shaped the US food system, which was built on land taken from Indigenous people and further developed with the forced labor of enslaved Black people. Indigenous people, primarily Abenaki, are the original land stewards here and have grown crops, hunted, gathered, and fished across present-day Vermont for over 10,000 years. Europeans brought foreign diseases, waged war, took land, and led the eugenics movement, leading to a significantly reduced and marginalized Abenaki population with little access to their unceded ancestral lands.

Vermont is heralded as the first state to abolish slavery (1777), but the ban only applied to Black individuals over age 21, allowing enslavement of Black youth for another 30 years. Today, many Black people in Vermont—both multi-generation Vermonters and newer community members—still experience marginalization in access to farmland, capital, services, fair wages, food, and other areas of the food system.

Since the 1990s, Latinx farmworkers have supported Vermont’s dairy industry and agricultural economy, but some individuals work under unsafe conditions, with low wages, and/or without full payment. Some Latinx farmworkers lack access to basic human needs like safe housing, health care, and culturally relevant foods.²

The retention and recruitment of BIPOC living, working, and thriving in the state is critical for Vermont’s future.³ It is also crucial that Vermont’s food system acknowledge the significant economic impact of BIPOC in the state—through farming, food, labor, entrepreneurship, innovation, and more. This brief focuses on racial equity in three areas of the Vermont food system: farming

success, food security, and the workforce. There are many other fundamental areas of the food system that must be addressed. Ultimately, more focus, financial support, and effort is necessary to conduct a thorough evaluation of the state of racial equity in the Vermont food system and to develop an equitable path forward.

Glossary of Terms

It is important to note that language and terminology are constantly evolving. Being adaptable and using language preferred by communities of different identities is vital to being inclusive and more equitable.

- **BIPOC:** an acronym for Black, Indigenous, People of Color, used both as an adjective and a proper noun. This term is considered more inclusive than People of Color alone, and reflects our varied experiences of oppression and marginalization.
- **Food sovereignty:** “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”⁴
- **Latinx:** a gender-neutral term for individuals from Latin America or of Latin American descent.
- **Structural racism:** the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal—that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for BIPOC communities. See *Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force* definition.
- **Unceded lands:** land that was never willingly handed over or legally signed away.

Farming Success

Current Conditions

Supporting BIPOC farmers is a key part of achieving racial equity in the Vermont food system, because viable farms are the foundation of a robust and resilient agricultural economy. To establish and grow a farm business requires affordable farmland, access to business networks (e.g., service providers and purchasing managers), flexible capital, and more (see *Supporting Future Farmers* brief). BIPOC farmers may face challenges accessing these resources due to bias, language and cultural barriers, loan refusals, and other aspects of structural racism.

Characteristics of Vermont Producers and Farms by Ethnicity and Race, 2017

Vermont producers are overwhelmingly white (97.7%) and operate approximately 99% of the land in farms according to the 2017 US Census of Agriculture. Only 2.3% of producers on Vermont farms identified as BIPOC.⁵ This is below the 6% of BIPOC farmers in New England as a whole, and the 4.87% nationally.

	Hispanic	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	White
Producers						
Number	124	90	32	36	15	12,245
Average Age	50.2	55.3	42.8	47.1	48.1	55.9
Farms						
Number	108	73	29	36	13	6,797
Average Size (acres)	168	144	62	183	110	175
Average Total Value of Production	\$142,806	\$58,260	Not Available	Not Available	\$13,538	\$114,872

Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Many BIPOC farmers are young, beginning farmers renting small parcels and do not own farmland or have a farming background.⁶
- BIPOC may not have access to personal savings, conventional agricultural credit, or alternative capital.
- The diverse aspirations, needs, and strengths of BIPOC farmers may not be well understood by service providers and policymakers.
- Farm services and support do not always reach BIPOC farmers and may not be well-matched to their needs.

Opportunities

- Farm service provider position(s) focused on BIPOC and located at BIPOC-run Vermont food system organizations would go far toward supporting BIPOC farmers.
- Farm viability programs can diversify their workforce, deepen competencies and relationships, and better align with and leverage the goals and strengths of BIPOC farmers and BIPOC-led groups.
- Alternative farmland access methods and farm financing mechanisms exist that may further support BIPOC farming opportunities and success.

Food Security

Current Conditions

Minimal data currently exists about food insecurity rates by race in Vermont. Federal nutrition assistance programs have immigration status requirements that may limit access to nutrition assistance for many new Americans. Black and Indigenous communities in Vermont are more likely to have higher rates of overweight/obesity than other races, and may face higher rates of other chronic diseases, in alignment with national data.⁷ Latinx migrant farmworkers experience higher rates of food insecurity than the state average.⁸

Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Limited outreach and support, stigmatization, and language barriers can restrict BIPOC access to nutrition assistance programs.
- A one-size-fits-all approach to increasing food security does not effectively reach all under-resourced BIPOC communities.
- Abenaki food sovereignty initiatives face land access barriers and limited funding support.
- Latinx farmworkers' access to food may be constrained by transportation barriers, hypervisibility yet isolation, and fear of border patrol agents.⁹

Opportunities

- Indigenous food sovereignty projects which advocate for hunting and fishing rights, and partner with institutions to grow ancestral crops, can be built upon with funding and staffing resources.
- Training, education, and a more racially diverse workforce could help service providers serve BIPOC constituents.
- Programs that distribute culturally relevant food and ensure good wages and living conditions for Latinx farmworkers can be expanded and better funded.

BIPOC in the Workforce

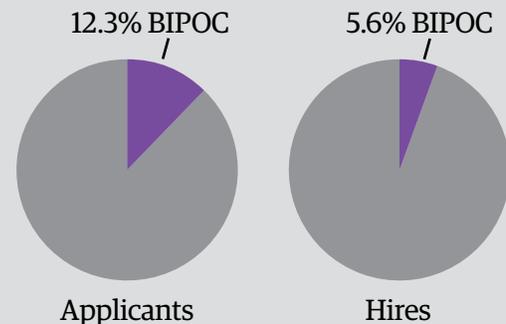
Current Conditions

A precise picture of the current conditions for the BIPOC labor force in Vermont is not evident at this time. A recently released report reveals some data on race for employees of the State of Vermont (Vermont's largest employer).¹⁰ A similar effort is needed to collect employment data across Vermont and thoroughly evaluate racial equity in the workplace. Vermont must act on the current workforce crisis (see [Labor and Workforce brief](#)) and navigate the opportunity to welcome racially diverse people into Vermont.

Nationally, the U.S grew by **19.5 million** people between 2010-2019, a growth rate of **6.3%**. While the white population declined by a fraction of a percent, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian American, and Black populations grew by rates of **20%**, **29%**, and **8.5%** respectively.

State of Vermont Applicants and Hires

In FY 2019, BIPOC comprised 12.3% of State of Vermont job applicants, but only made up 5.6% of hires.



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- BIPOC are seldom involved in Vermont food-system decision-making opportunities and leadership roles related to program development, funding, and legislation.
- In light of the national climate around racial (in)equity, many BIPOC fear local adverse safety repercussions.
- Attempts to address racial equity in the Vermont workforce are often met with the mythology that there are not enough BIPOC in Vermont to be favorably impacted.

Opportunities

- Programs can be created to support cooperative or sole-proprietor economic development opportunities for BIPOC business ownership, especially small farms, resulting in sustainable economic impacts on Vermont's working landscape.
- Remote Worker Grant Program outreach can be broadened to BIPOC farm and food businesses in the state and those considering moving to Vermont.
- BIPOC should be included in the State of Vermont's economic development planning efforts.

Summary

Deep rooted, structural racism in the food system has perpetuated racial inequity within farming and food production, to food access and food security, to the workforce, and beyond. Building an equitable food system, and the onus of better supporting, serving, and partnering with BIPOC communities in Vermont, cannot solely fall on BIPOC. White stakeholders can and must do more to support a more racially equitable food system, in consultation with and following the leadership of BIPOC to make equitable and just transformations.

Recommendations

- Develop a scope of work for—and raise sufficient funding to support—in-depth research, data collection, and a thorough investigation of racial equity in the Vermont food system, leading to a comprehensive plan of action. It is crucial that this work and any resulting initiatives include BIPOC leaders who are compensated for their contributions.
- Organizations and stakeholders across all components of the food system should prioritize racial equity and the leadership, participation, and representation of BIPOC. It is imperative that initiatives focused on BIPOC be developed with paid partnership and input from the BIPOC community. All organizations in the food system should undertake guided, systematic internal processes to make racial equity a core principle of their work.
- Funders should improve funding opportunities for BIPOC organizations and BIPOC-owned businesses through such tools as developing multi-year, unrestricted BIPOC-centered grants and loan programs, removing barriers such as unnecessarily long grant application processes, and combatting explicit and implicit bias against BIPOC communities.
- The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets should expeditiously operationalize the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) principle on racial equity that was ratified by NASDA and supported by all the members of the Northeastern Association of State Departments of Agriculture.
- The Vermont Farm to Plate Network should commit to a plan of action to promote equity within the Network, help dismantle white supremacy culture, and eradicate the structural racism that continues to disenfranchise Black, Indigenous, and other communities, farmers, and food system workers of color.

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Farm to Plate is Vermont’s food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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