

**Understanding the Experiences of Fragrance-Sensitive Food-Insecure
Vermonters with Utilizing Programmatic Food Insecurity Interventions**

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Understanding the Experiences of Fragrance-Sensitive Food-Insecure Vermonters with Utilizing Programmatic Food Insecurity Interventions

1. Title:

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2. Introduction and Research Question

Programmatic food insecurity interventions (PFIs) in Vermont vary from indoor locations, as in the case of food shelves and soup kitchens, to open-air locations for VeggieVanGo (outdoor distribution of fresh produce) and gleaning (gathering leftover produce after harvest), to home delivery programs like Meals-On-Wheels. Cleaning and sanitizing supplies are often key to keeping locations clean and safe for both staff and participants, especially for indoor brick-and-mortar locations. Often, the cleaning and sanitation supplies have fragrances in them. Exposure to fragrance chemicals on humans, in cleaning supplies and on the packaging of shelf items offered in the closed-air conditions is often noticeable by many. Some, however, who are more fragrance sensitive, will not only notice the fragrances, but may experience adverse effects to their health, and knowing these outcomes may lead a few of them to having to avoid that food distribution resource altogether due to the fragrances' impact on their health. This research paper aims to understand the experiences of these fragrance-sensitive food-insecure Vermonters and related behaviors as a result of sensitivity to fragrances.

About 35% of Americans “reported health problems, such as migraine headaches and respiratory difficulties, when exposed to fragranced products”

(Steinemann, 2016). “Fragrance” refers to a mixture of synthetically-produced chemicals that are added to products to create a scent or mask odors. Fragrance sensitivity has become a significant enough health concern, that in June 2025 the American Medical Association passed its first fragrance regulation, acknowledging “that some environmental exposures may have the potential to substantially limit major life activities of an individual with fragrance sensitivity and related disorders” and encouraging “health care facilities, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations to adopt and promote fragrance-free policies” (American Medical Association, 2025). A local support and advocacy group “Fragrance Free Friends of Southern Vermont (FFFsv)”, for example, has a current member count of over 130, and, according to its founder, keeps growing as well as offering itself as a template and a mentoring service to people from other regions who are interested to start similar groups in their localities (J.Hall, personal communication, February 13, 2026). The interest from other regions, as well as a growing interest in this relatively young group and AMA’s new policy reflects that fragrance-sensitive population exists and is seeking to have a presence, if not accommodations, in our society.

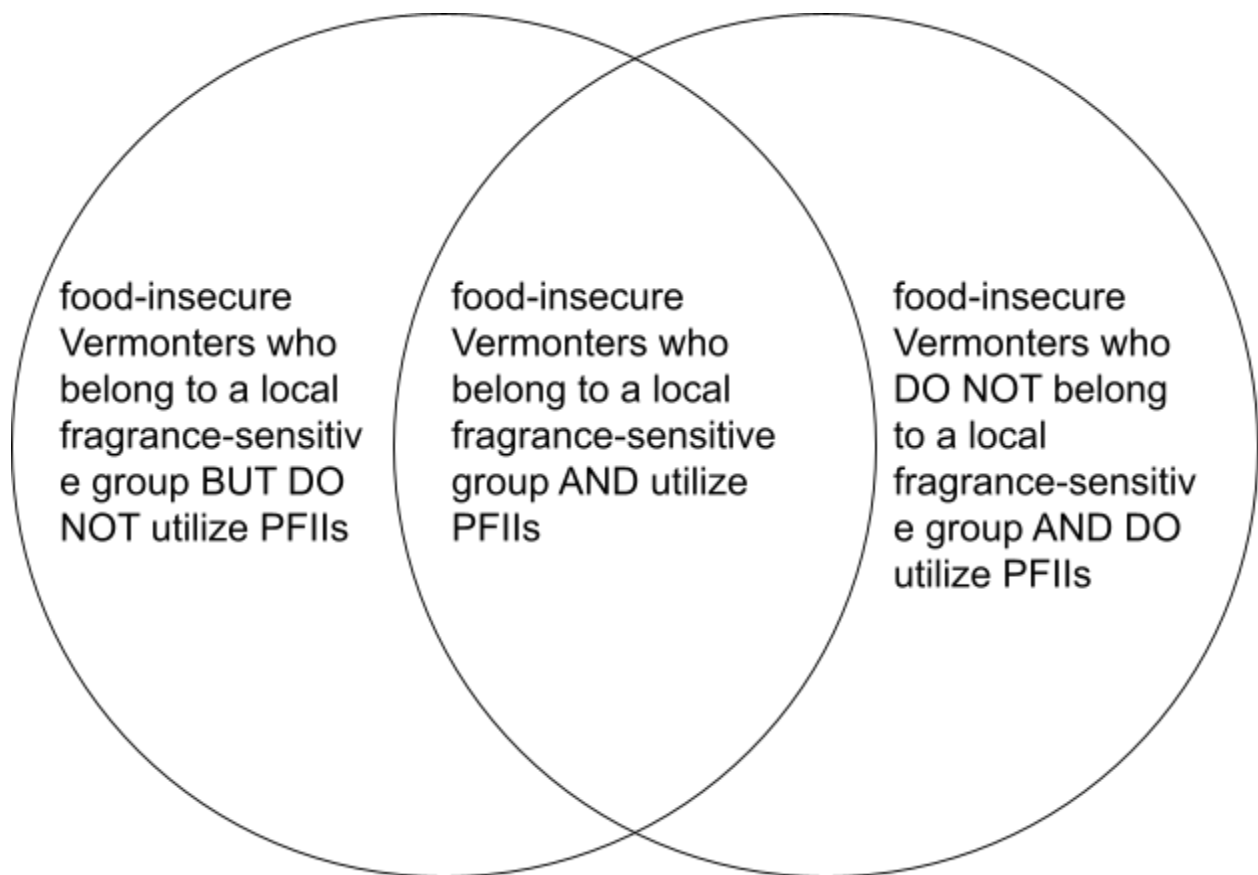
The rate of food insecurity, which is defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (Rabbitt et al., 2025), in Vermont is estimated to be between 9.2% (State Fact Sheets, 2025) and 40% (Hunger Free Vermont, 2023). The reason for such a significant difference in the estimates is unclear, reflecting the complexity of this topic for this geographic region. While the data on the percent of the food-insecure Vermonters, who experience adverse health effects due to fragrances, is missing, it is an important social work issue specifically because of that: it means that

the community is unseen and thus its needs are likely not to be heard, while the consequences for its members can be as drastic as someone in need of food having to choose between getting free food and having a migraine for a few days following food acquisition, for example, or even foregoing free food distributions altogether. Moreover, the fragrance-sensitive population is likely to be at a higher risk of food insecurity due to their potential inability to work in many social environments, which are often fragranced, resulting in lower income and reliance on social services due to limited work opportunities.

Our exploratory research question is: How does sensitivity to fragrance chemicals affect food insecure Vermonters and their access to PFIs? To answer this research question, we would interview individuals who live in Vermont and have experience with food insecurity as well as suffer from fragrance-sensitivity, about their experiences, in order to understand what choices they had to or wished they could make to accommodate to their sensitivity and needs. Because the population of fragrance-sensitive Vermonters is likely to be smaller than the population of food-insecure ones, we would start with identifying members of local fragrance-sensitivity organizations, such as FFFsv, mentioned above, and inviting self-selection of those with food insecurity history to be interviewed first. Understanding their attendance of food distribution locations would help us gauge the importance of interviewing the attendees of such places with fragrance sensitivities. It is possible that FFFsv members avoid food distribution places altogether due to the degree of severity of their symptoms there; if so, there may be a distinction in the tolerance of fragrances between people who use food distribution services and those who do not but do identify

as food insecure. We would then survey those that do utilize PFIs, with the aim to interview the fragrance-sensitive portion of them and to understand their experiences, while holding the awareness that their tolerance of fragrances is higher than the first group, and thus potentially needing to adjust the interview questions to accommodate that measure and the consequences of it.

To put it differently, there are two layers of potential food-insecure interviewees: first, the fragrance-sensitive ones who also identify as food insecure, whether or not they utilize PFIs; second, those who in fact visit PFIs and identify as fragrance-sensitive. Here is how these two layers would cross over:



3. Methodology

Qualitative framework. This qualitative research would rely on phenomenological methodology, as it is aiming to understand the common meaning for a group of individuals who are living through a shared phenomenon of being both food insecure and fragrance sensitive. Aspects of narrative research would be present during the initial two parts of the interview - understanding the histories of both food insecurity and fragrance sensitivity, as well as the evolution of their behaviors in response to the evolution of these factors in their lives and to any programmatic changes that took place prior.

Interview structure. The interview would be organized into the following topics: (1) food insecurity history, (2) fragrance sensitivity history, (3) impact of fragrance sensitivity on choices and behaviors related to food insecurity, and (4) vision of a different world, that is, what changes would they like to see in the PFIs to feel supported in their fragrance sensitivity and food insecurity. It is aiming to understand each variable separately first, in order to understand the background of the respondent, and afterwards explore these variables' interaction and impact in order to understand what drives the choices and behaviors of fragrance-sensitive respondents and ultimately how respondents envision their needs could be met, which could serve as a starting point for guiding PFIs towards making their services more accessible.

Sampling strategy. As mentioned above, there is currently no data available about the behaviors of food insecure fragrance sensitive Vermonters. As such, I envision a combination of sampling strategies. First, having identified a single such individual, we would utilize Snowball sampling strategy to meet other individuals who

share similar characteristics. The aim is to gain understanding of their experiences, and specifically identify how much and what PFIs they do utilize. We would then proceed to utilize Purposive sampling strategy among the attendees of the food distribution centers, with the inclusion criteria being: food-insecure, rural, Vermonters, self-identifying as fragrance-sensitive. Depending on what kind of utilization of PFIs the initial (Snowball) sample data reveals, our Purposive sampling may need to be smaller (if the initial interviewees utilize these resources) or larger (if they do not).

Trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the data will be tested by the following criteria:

- *Credibility* will be verified by seeking out interviewees from two different directions: those who are fragrance-sensitive - exploring their usage of the interventions, and those that use interventions (and are fragrance-sensitive - exploring their experiences. This double-sided approach should lead a wider range of perspectives and experiences represented.

Member-checking could be done by both paraphrasing to the interviewee what the interviewer heard - to verify the understanding of the experiences, and by returning the coded results to the interviewee for verification as another way to verify that the interviewee's experiences were interpreted as intended. Each interview would be audio-recorded for verifiability and to be able to go back to the original expressions if the member-checking reveals misunderstandings.

- Depending on the initial findings, *transferability* may be challenging due to the fragrance sensitivities' experiences and impacts ranging widely for

individuals. Having said that, an exploration into the fourth part of the interview, the vision of how the world could be different and more accommodating to them, may lead to a generalizable list of suggestions for the interventions. It is possible that the interviews reveal more shared experiences than expected. The results could be shared back with interviewees, as well as PFIs' attendees, as well as through other channels - to reach the population that does not attend those interventions: for example, to the offices where people sign up for SNAP and other food benefits, at farmers' markets and similar places that multiply benefits, to NOFA which gives out scholarships to food-insecure Vermonters, and more. The aim of this sharing back with the community will be two-fold: to validate the data and gauge how transferable and generalizable it is, as well as to widen the awareness of fragrance-sensitivity and its impact, since, as discussed above and mentioned in the pilot interview, the population affected is significant, however many fragrance-sensitive people appear to believe they are alone in their struggle from fragrances and do not declare themselves as such, thus going along with the fragranced spaces and tolerating the adverse consequences for their health. Informing them of experiences of others with similar challenges may be validating and empowering for them.

- *Dependability* could be ensured through utilizing the same interviewing questions for all participants, as well as a consistent coding strategy. Dependability would improve with clear definitions of the term "fragrance sensitivity", which appears to be difficult to do, based on the pilot interview

and research. The dependability may be compromised additionally by varying distribution of fragrance-sensitive population in various geographic regions, as well as varying degrees of their participation in food insecurity programmatic interventions, driven in part by the accommodations their local interventions already provide for their fragrance sensitivity. Thus, this research is currently exploratory and dependability is likely to be low.

- *Confirmability* can be ensured by including multiple researchers in the coding process to minimize researcher bias in coding. It would be important to review and potentially update the coding schema once all interviews have been conducted, to accommodate for both layers of the interviewees, as explained above and portrayed in the Venn diagram. It is also important to check the reliability of codes across coders to avoid any biases and increase repeatability potential.

Coding. Since the size of sample population is unknown due to missing data, we would want to optimize the trustworthiness and replicability of the data. We are more likely to achieve that using *descriptive* type of coding - it will help identify common themes and topics and potentially support the exploration of both generalizability and breadth of the experiences of the interviewees while coding the interviews.

4. Interview Guide

As described above, the interview is made of four sections as follows:

(1) interviewee's food insecurity history

1. Food insecurity is defined by USDA as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”. What is your history with food insecurity?
2. When you are lacking food for an active, healthy life - what programs do you participate in to assist you, and what is the frequency of you using them?

(2) interviewee's fragrance sensitivity history

3. Tell me about your fragrance sensitivity, how it developed, its symptoms and effects.
4. What places and services do you find yourself generally unable to access and why as a result of your fragrance sensitivity?
5. What was your experience, if any, advocating for your needs of fragrance-free environment with any places or services?
6. How prevalent do you believe this sensitivity to be for the general population? Who else do you know to be affected and how?

(3) impact of fragrance sensitivity on choices and behaviors related to food insecurity

7. When no open-air PFIs are available - what do you do to address your food insecurity?

(4) vision for a supportive PFII.

8. What would make the food you need more accessible for you - that is, what changes would you like to see in regard to your fragrance sensitivity, and how would your behaviors shift as a result?
9. What ways, if any, do you see fragrance sensitivity being addressed on the wider scale?

Brief discussion. This interview guide was tested via one pilot interview with a member of the study population, who has been food insecure for 25 years and fragrance sensitive for 12-15 years, with the fragrance sensitivity becoming more acute 1.5 years ago. Our interview was successful in obtaining the data I needed, and more. By the end of the interview, it was clear that the interviewee's experiences with both food insecurity and fragrance sensitivity led them to finding alternatives to brick-and-mortar PFIs, such as programs like NOFA scholarships and Farmers Markets' cash boost to literally multiply the impact of the policy-based interventions like SNAP benefits. The interview showcased that many fragrance-sensitive individuals don't share that about it due to feeling alone and misunderstood when they make requests from their environments about changing fragrance behaviors and get shamed or disparaged for being too needy. Fragrance sensitivities may lead to financial instability because these individuals often struggle to find employment that is either fragrance-free or fully remote, and fewer employment opportunities lead to a higher risk of food insecurity. It was informative to learn about the interviewee's advocacy attempts and their outcomes, which led them to starting a local peer group that attracts both local

fragrance-sensitive individuals as well as more distant ones, who are eager to learn how to start such groups in their area.

The nature of qualitative research, with its limited structure, enabled access to some of the information that I would not have known to ask about, for example experiences of shame about fragrance sensitivity, yet it is very useful in understanding the experiences of my target population and, if I were to continue with this research, would enhance future interviews by offering trailheads for deeper understanding of said experiences.

Finally, this population is needing to be seen. “Your willingness to include this topic was the best thing that happened on this topic for me. I feel grateful.” was the concluding statement of this pilot interview. The recent AMA policy is a win, and there is a lot more to be done.

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