

# DOPE LABS

## Transcript of Lab 033: Supermarket Sweep

**Titi:** When the pandemic first hit and we realized it was spreading like wildfire and everybody was starting to get stay at home orders. I was telling folks, listen, things might get out of hand. You probably need to stock up on groceries because I think everybody is going to lose it and everybody's gonna hit the grocery store and buy up everything. So..

**Zakiya:** Yes,.

**Titi:** ...Prepare yourself. That's what I told my parents, my friends, my sisters, everybody.

**Zakiya:** Same, same. If you listened to Lab 23, we kind of knew some things were in the pipeline.

**Titi:** Yes.

**Zakiya:** And so I think based on that, I really tried to say, OK, what do I need from the grocery store? But Bruh, the grocery store basically turned in a supermarket sweep.

**Titi:** Yes. People were buying everything, toilet paper, paper towels. I didn't see that for months and months and months. I felt lucky that we had stocked up before everything started getting crazy. But then there was also just food missing. Yes, there was no flour. There was no chicken.

**Zakiya:** I remember you being very upset about bacon.

**Titi:** Bacon is very important to me. I just want to be clear about that. And when I got to the grocery store, there was none. And I almost had a full blown meltdown in the grocery store. I was like, excuse me, sir, is there any more in the back? And he was like, no, there isn't any more in the back. We're in a pandemic girl. It was like, all right, right, right, right, right.

**Zakiya:** It's really crazy because depending on where you live. Different people were saying different things were missing and it was almost like overnight. Something that you love could become a high value item in this supermarket sweep everybody's going for it. They're all put it in their cars. And by the time you get there, it is no more.

**Titi:** Right. So we reached out to ya because we wanted to hear from you and know what your experience was being in the grocery store during the pandemic and what items you noticed that were gone.

**Voice 1:** So I've been going to grocery stores trying to find ginger beer in Ascalon as so many stores in Durham and for some reason, ginger beer be off the shelves as well as flour and fish fry.

**Voice 2:** There's a pepperoni shortage, period, but I'll try to use turkey, pepperoni, and that's not available. Chickpea flour has never really been there for a while at Trader Joe's. they didnt have nutritional yeast.

**Voice 3:** I'm Latino and kind of my go to I make quesadillas with a side of beans. And I went to my grocery store and there were literally like no beans other than red kidney beans. And they were like, absolutely no corn or flour tortillas.

**Voice 4:** It's really interesting to me that if I go to what I perceive to be a more affluent neighborhood, there is always cleaning supplies.

**Titi:** It kind of blew my mind. Some of the things I didn't notice that were they were gone.

**Zakiya:** Y'all ever eaten a lot of being somebody said canned beans, frozen beans. I dont even think I buy frozen beans. Somebody else said, what are you doing with all the legumes? There were no lentils. Did you at least have a good recipe?

**Titi:** I won't struggle in this because I don't eat none of that. But y'all also said the yall were missing chicken, red meat.

**Zakiya:** That's where you're going to get my friend.

**Titi:** Even the imitation meat was going off the shelves. Yeah. So some of the people that listen to the show are vegan or vegetarian. And they were like all of my vegan staples were gone. All the meat eaters came and were like, well, if I can't get ground beef, might as well get this beyond meat over here.

**Zakiya:** But I was also surprised by some of the stuff that I found. You know, our friend from grad school Tamika said she couldnt find soy sauce.

**Titi:** Right. What are yall doing?

**Zakiya:** What are you doing with the soy sauce? It's all salty. You only need a little bit.

**Titi:** Right. Are yall going for the low sodium soy sauce or a regular soy sauce? I'm very confused by this. And then another person said febreze,.

**Zakiya:** What's happening?

**Titi:** Y'all know that febreze isn't disinfectant, right? It just makes the air smell good.

**Zakiya:** Do you have stinky roommates?

**Titi:** And because you were gonna be at home, I'm going to say is that and that you didn't think it was disinfectant.

**Zakiya:** Some of you also see it on a struggle foods were missing.

**Titi:** Frozen pizza.

**Zakiya:** Instant noodles, Kraft, mac and cheese. If you buy a deluxe box, that big blue box, that's not struggle. I just want to point that out.

**Titi:** I'm Titi.

**Zakiya:** And I'm Zakiya.

**Titi:** And from Spotify. This is Dope Labs.

**Zakiya:** All right, so those first few weeks of the pandemic that felt crazy to see all this stuff missing from the grocery store, I was shocked. But many weeks on down the road, the grocery store still wasn't fully stocked. There was no meat. I remember people saying, oh, we're going to have a meat shortage. But then I was seeing on the news that people were throwing away chicken wings because there is no ACC tournament. I don't know how real that was. I just was seeing all this conflicting messaging. Like people were saying, there's no food in these areas. But then I saw people dumping potatoes in Idaho. I didn't understand how that worked.

**Titi:** Right. Most of us are completely in the dark about where this food comes from and how there could be a shortage when in America that's one of the things that folks are always saying, well, we have so much food waste, we have so much food waste, so much food that we're wasting it.

**Zakiya:** And that brings us to today's topic. We're going to talk all about food systems.

**Titi:** Let's jump into to the recitation. So what do we know? I know that there is huge infrastructure put in place to make sure that folks can get to food. But I feel like I don't know much more. We said food systems. What does that actually mean? Zakiya do you know?

**Zakiya:** I mean, when I think about food systems, I think about like the regulation of food. But I don't know who is the food system president like who's in charge of making sure that there's bacon at your grocery store. Who's responsible for that?

**Titi:** Is the government in charge?

**Zakiya:** I don't know.

**Titi:** We've got a lot of questions. So what do we want to know?

**Zakiya:** I want to know, first of all, what is a food system? I'm interested in how our food systems and their ability to get us different types of food affects, like your ability to have a nutritious meal.

**Titi:** Yeah.

**Zakiya:** And who's able to access nutritious meals, especially during a pandemic when we're experiencing shortages?

**Titi:** What type of government assistance is available for people that are struggling with food insecurity during the pandemic? And what exactly is food insecurity? Who falls into that category?

**Zakiya:** I'm also interested when the food was missing, that felt scary, right? That's a weakness of our food system. But there were some things that I felt like we always saw, and those are some strengths. But I don't know what's driving those things. What makes some things disappear quicker than others?

**Titi:** How are farmers impacted by the pandemic?

**Zakiya:** Yeah, well, let's get to the bottom of this and jump into the discussion.

**Titi:** Our guest for today's lab is Dr. Marie Spiker.

**Dr. Spiker:** My name is Marie Spiker. I am a registered dietitian and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Public Health.

**Zakiya:** Dr. Spiker studies the connections between food systems, nutrition and public health. And we wanted her help understanding how the food we eat gets from the farm onto our plate.

**Dr. Spiker:** When we talk about the food system, the big picture is that it's everything from farm to fork to flush,.

**Titi:** Farm to fork to flush. Let's break that down. Let's start with the farm.

**Zakiya:** So when we think about how food is produced, you know, plants, animals, marine environments, all of that as part of that farm part.

**Titi:** And then after the food is produced, you have to distribute it. It has to get to the stores for us to purchase it. So it has to be sorted, clean, packaged and then shipped.

**Zakiya:** And we really have to consider what's going on in the places where we are interacting with food. So food environments, this could be cafeterias, grocery stores, farmer's markets, all kinds of places,.

**Titi:** Depending on those food environments. It dictates our food choices.

**Zakiya:** You also have to ask, is the food you want available even if it's available? Is it affordable? All of that leads us to the fork.

**Dr. Spiker:** And then we get to the consumption part of the food system where we're eating food. And there's all these considerations around our own knowledge, our preferences, our cultural norms and values, and how food actually interacts with our individual biology.

**Titi:** And finally, there's the flush.

**Zakiya:** Flush refers to the ways that human waste products can be recycled back into the environment, as well as the ways we waste food throughout the supply chain, whether that's at the farm level or just things we dispose of in our own households as consumers.

**Titi:** And the EPA put out an estimate for 2010 that said that 31 percent of the food supply was lost to waste.

**Zakiya:** Our food system is a big place and each of us is a part of it.

**Titi:** Dr. Spiker says about a quarter of our global population has agriculture livelihood. So they work in industries that provide food. So that's about a quarter of people on Earth that have a hand in producing the food that we eat.

**Dr. Spiker:** And you can also think of all the workers in between. So, you know, from the person who might do marketing at a food company to the person who's delivering the food to your doorstep.

**Zakiya:** I was looking at some stats and it was saying that farmers account for one percent of the population in the United States and almost 28 percent of the farmers are between the ages of 55 to 64. I don't know if that's representative of the population, are young folks getting into farming?

**Titi:** I have no idea.

**Zakiya:** It's easy to think about food shortages, especially on the heels of this pandemic. And this prompted us to really learn more about the food supply chains in the United States and how COVID 19 specifically has affected our supply chains.

**Titi:** You know, we didn't talk about was the flour.

**Zakiya:** Yes, that's right.

**Titi:** Everybody is trying to make bread. Everybody was trying do sourdough. And I just stumbled upon bread. Tick tock. Where they're making bread on tick tock. And showing how they do it. That's a lot of work. I don't think I'll be doing that.

**Zakiya:** No, I'm here for the whole loaf. Many of us had this experience together. But we also know that pre COVID there are many people in this country who don't have enough food. And at the same time, we had incredible food waste. And I think it makes you ask this question of like, how do these two things exist together?

**Titi:** Right. It doesn't make sense. How can you have one and the other happening at the exact same time?

**Zakiya:** And so I think we want to know what causes these shortages and surpluses.

**Dr. Spiker:** So if we want to take, like the 30000 foot view of the U.S. food system, the big picture is that we have the privilege of the very safe and abundant food supply overall. And that may not be the case when food is flying off the shelves due to panic buying related to the pandemic or natural disasters. And that's also not the case for many families who are under resourced or who lives in underserved communities. But by and large, our food supply in the US is one that really benefits from efficiency and from economies of scale.

**Zakiya:** Economy of scale is based on this understanding that there are certain fixed costs related to production. That means the price of certain things required for production don't change no matter how much you make. So, for example, this can be labor equipment and even rent for land.

**Titi:** Other costs vary like seed, fertilizer and chemicals, and the price can change depending on the market.

**Zakiya:** So I'm farmer Zakiya and I'm growing carrots. The machinery I need to till the land, the taxes on my property, the machinery I need to sort carrots, the price of those things don't change. Those are fixed costs that I have to consider when I'm determining how much it costs for each carrot.

**Titi:** But if Zakiya increases the number of carrots that she produces, she can easily lower her total cost per unit, allowing her to increase profits and making the total cost for the product lower.

**Zakiya:** So let's just do a quick example. If it's a thousand dollars is my total fixed costs. If I produce a thousand carrots, that's a dollar carrot. But if I produce 5000 carrots, my fixed cost per carrot, it goes down to 20 cents per carrot.

**Titi:** So this economy of scale allows us to produce a lot and at a less expensive price. And that means that Americans have access to less expensive food.

**Dr. Spiker:** So in the US, we're actually one of the few countries where on average we spend less than 10 percent of our household income on food. And there are countries, by contrast, where people might spend upwards of 40 percent or 50 percent of their income on food.

**Zakiya:** But more food at a lower cost brings us to another consideration. And that's nutrition. Just because some food is affordable doesn't mean it's the kind of food we need to stay healthy.

**Dr. Spiker:** One of the drawbacks of our food system is that while we are efficient food producers, the foods we produce don't necessarily align with our nutritional goals.

**Titi:** I don't know if you remember, but Zakiya I'm sure you remember because we're of the same age group. As soon as I start thinking of nutrition goals and what I should be eating. I think of the food pyramid.

**Zakiya:** Oh, yes, I remember the food pyramid. The whole base was like wheat, grains and bread.

**Titi:** I can not. They're like, everybody needs to eat a 10 foot hoagie for dinner every night.

**Zakiya:** And you remember the very tip of that triangle. It was like all the stuff you love oil, vinegar, fat. It was like, is this where the potato chips go?

**Titi:** But did you know that the food pyramid is no longer. It's like it's wrong. Like we're not supposed to go by it anymore.

**Zakiya:** What do you mean this is wrong? I'm still building my meals based on that food pyramid.

**Titi:** That food pyramid was canceled back in 2005. So the original food pyramid that we all know, it started in 1992. Then by 2005 they said, OK. This isn't right. So they changed it. So then the USDA in 2011 came up with this thing called my plate and the vegetables and grains take up the largest sections on the plate.

**Zakiya:** So that's a lot of fruits and vegetables. And Dr. Spiker says the United States isn't currently producing enough for everyone to get the recommended amount.

**Dr. Spiker:** All the fruits and vegetables that we have in the U.S.. When you combine what we grow and what we import, it averages out to about a cup and a half per person per day, which falls short of the recommendation, which is around two and a half cups per person per day. So if everyone in America decided that starting tomorrow, we're all gonna do our five day fruits and vegetables. We wouldn't actually have enough fruits and vegetables in the food supply to support that.

**Zakiya:** I'm not trying to cause a panic, but I also don't want to downplay this. I mean, what are we supposed to do? Take turns.

**Titi:** Yeah, like Monday was a Friday. The fruits and vegetables are for me. And then Tuesdays and Thursdays and Saturdays. You got them. I guess we can't all be healthy at once.

**Zakiya:** So how can we get enough fruits and vegetables here to meet our nutritional goals?

**Dr. Spiker:** In the US, if we wanted to close that fruit and veggie gap and we wanted to do it through domestic production, we would actually need to devote another 13 million acres to fruit and vegetable production, which is easier said than done because not all of our land is suitable for growing horticultural crops.

**Titi:** How big is an acre?

**Zakiya:** Well, one acre is forty three thousand five hundred sixty square feet and that means nothing to me. A football field with its endzones is about one point three acres. So we're basically talking about 10 million football fields of fruits and veggies.

**Titi:** Where are we going to get thirteen million acres? That's almost the size of West Virginia.

**Zakiya:** And even if we capture that much land for fruits and vegetables, we still got to space it out. We don't want one massive farm in West Virginia. And that's for a few reasons.

**Titi:** Why do we see so much of some foods, but not of others? Dr Spiker explains that this is due to consolidation, which is another drawback of our safe, abundant food system.

**Dr. Spiker:** So a really good example of this is the way we've consolidated meat packing plants. So in the 1980s, the top four companies with the meat packing plants for beef controlled about a quarter of the overall market share. And today, the top four companies control over 80 percent of the market share. We also have dramatically fewer meat packing plants than ever before. And so any given farmer or rancher has fewer options about where they can sell their product. And this kind of consolidation creates a supply chain vulnerability.

**Zakiya:** That that's a monopoly. They're talking about Time Warner Cable and all these other people he's talking about tiktok. You need to figure out what's going on with the beef.

**Titi:** Yall are worried about the wrong folks.

**Zakiya:** So this means we have big farms that are producing crops more efficiently and giving us this abundant food supply. But what happens to those systems in the wake of a pandemic?

**Dr. Spiker:** So on one side of the coin, when the system is working as intended, we have this abundance of affordable meat coming through. But on the other side of the coin, that same system can actually be quite easily strained in the face of even slight changes in the workforce or economics incentives or something else. And the pandemic, of course, introduced not just slight changes, but major changes.



**Titi:** Even when a big storm is coming. You know how everybody rushes to the store and buys up all the bread and milk and eggs?

**Zakiya:** I don't know what they are doing

**Titi:** just making French toast. I think that's the only thing you can make with bread, milk and eggs.

**Zakiya:** But I guess that makes me wonder, like, what can we do as consumers to alleviate some of that burden?

**Dr. Spiker:** Well, the challenge is like there's so much interplay between the supply and demand. And so when I talk to farmers, they say we would love to grow more fruits and vegetables, but the market is not there. And so you can't underestimate the power that we have as consumers. And when there is something that we want a certain food or a way that it's produced, the food system has a way of responding to that. It's actually quite responsive.

**Titi:** Absolutely. Every time a new food trend pops up, it's all over the place. In every grocery store.

**Zakiya:** Yes.

**Titi:** When celery juice became the thing that everybody wanted to have a glass of celery juice every day. First of all, it's nasty. You're not gonna convince me otherwise. I know it's nasty. I can see your choking that stuff down. But there was a lot more celery in the grocery stores.

**Zakiya:** But I also felt like I saw a different effect with, like kale and collard greens. First of all, that used to be like 49 to 50 cent a pound. Now I want to get a bunch of kale. Two ninety nine. No, Mike, you know, as good cook down to half a cup. That's one serving.

**Titi:** That's so true. That stuff never it doesn't keep his same size. Same thing with all the different types of milk, almond milk, oat milk, hemp milk, all these different types of milk. Everybody is ditching the cows milk and going over to these alternative milks. And so now I see them everywhere.

**Zakiya:** And so that's so interesting, though, right? When we consider this responsive food market, it still feels like it's responsive in some ways, but it's got some clogs and slow some slow places in other areas. All right. When the pandemic first hit, I was looking for any type of canned meat. Normally, you will catch a girl. I mean, I'll go with, you know, salmon and stuff like that, but also I guess I'm going to get these cans of corned beef hash. I don't know what's going to happen. And when you think about it. How can there be food waste and food shortages at the same time? Is all of this because of the pandemic, too?

**Dr. Spiker:** You might have seen headlines about dairy farmers dumping milk. So if we want to unpack this and look at what's going on. So when the pandemic started, we really radically

changed where we're consuming food so less in restaurants and then more at home. And a lot of the dairy that's in the food system actually gets to us through restaurants.

**Titi:** So the demand for dairy might have stayed the same through out the pandemic, but now it's being funneled primarily to grocery stores instead of restaurants.

**Dr. Spiker:** And so what happened is we've got dairy farmers who found themselves with the same amount of milk that they need to sell because the cows are producing milk. But fewer companies and supply chain stakeholders were able to accept it. So the milk is being produced, but there just wasn't anywhere for it to go in the supply chain.

**Titi:** That's a lot of changes that have to happen just for people to buy a gallon of milk. Even milk cartons are produced by a separate company. Somebody has got to supply those.

**Zakiya:** The food system is so much more than just the food itself. These wrappers, containers, dividers.

**Titi:** Right. They're all being made by a separate business. And once the demand goes down and they can't put out as much product, then all of these businesses, even the people who are putting it on the trucks and the trucks that take it to the store for you to purchase. I would imagine that they're feeling it as well.

**Dr. Spiker:** There are so many people involved and that transition just can't take place overnight.

**Zakiya:** We're going to take a break. But first, we want you to confess now that you know how responsive the food market is. What have you helped force into our grocery stores? If you're listening on Spotify, take the poll below to let us know what food trend bandwagon's you jumped on. And then we're going to talk more about how the pandemic has affected our food systems and food insecurity for so many Americans. When we come back.

**Titi:** We're back now that we've learned all about food systems and some of the issues with food supply chains in the United States. We want to know what's the state of food insecurity. With so many people losing their jobs, how has the pandemic magnified this insecurity or loss?

**Dr. Spiker:** So in 2019 before the pandemic, about eleven or twelve percent of families in the US for food insecure during at least part of the year.

**Titi:** That's a lot of people. The number of households in the United States is about one hundred and twenty eight million. And that means about 11 to 12 percent is about 14 million household.

**Zakiya:** And when you consider this about 2.6 People in each household, that's 36 million people, more than 36 million. We asked Dr. Spiker what it meant to be food insecure. How is it measured?

**Dr. Spiker:** And we measure this by asking families about whether they have enough food. So, for example, we might ask in the past month, have you eaten less food than you felt that you should because there wasn't enough money for food? Or did you find, you know, did or anyone in your family find themselves skipping meals or eating meals that weren't balanced again because there wasn't money for food?

**Zakiya:** And then how has COVID changed the levels of food insecurity.

**Dr. Spiker:** It's really unprecedented rates. So it's a nationwide data from April estimated that about 35 percent of households with at least one child were experiencing food insecurity in April. So that's just a substantial increase. Really unprecedented.

**Titi:** That's a huge jump. That's almost three times the 2019 levels. This makes me think about the unemployment rate that jump from 3.5 Percent in February of 2020 to 14.7 Percent in April of 2020. If people aren't getting paychecks, how exactly are they supposed to put food on the table? We talked about this in lab 029: The roof is on fire, so make sure you check out that episode too, if you haven't already.

**Zakiya:** That is a really good point to tie in, Titi. And we have to consider not just what's happened in the pandemic, but also the low income families who were already struggling pre COVID. their rate of food insecurity is even higher.

**Dr. Spiker:** There was a survey fielded exclusively among low income households, and that survey found that almost half of them were food insecure. So about 44 percent. So when we talk about the pandemic exacerbating rates of food insecurity, it has less to do with disruptions in the supply chain, whether the shelves are empty or not. And more to do with the overall economic impacts that families are feeling as a result of job loss and other disruptions.

**Titi:** For real. The system, it's the system, the system, the system. I don't know if I sound crazy like it's the man. It's the man's fault. But for real, it always comes back to systemic structural barriers. And this is why it's so important to think about food through the systems lens.

**Zakiya:** And like we said earlier this season, we know COVID 19, disproportionately affects black and brown communities. So they're more likely to work in at risk industries like service or have underlying conditions. You layer those barriers on top of food and the food insecurity. Perfect storm.

**Dr. Spiker:** We know that the disparities that we see in nutritional outcomes are due to deep structural inequities, including poverty, including systemic racism. So we know that to be the case. But finding a path forward is quite challenging because, you know, we came into it saying, I want to improve nutrition. And now suddenly it's like the task is now we need to fix our deep seated structural inequities.

**Titi:** This is a huge issue. First things first, food is a basic need for survival. When we think about people just trying to survive on this planet, access to food is the first thing that they need. Beyond that, it's so important for health and development. People are already experiencing high

levels of stress. Working from home, dealing with kids at home. And we talk a lot about that in the last lab life avalanche. So check that out. And a lot of people can't even access the food they need to support all of these higher level needs.

**Zakiya:** So let's just talk about families with kids. So for kids in low income families, often they're getting about two of their three major meals at school.

**Titi:** Right.

**Zakiya:** And without that support, school's not in session. What impact does this have on their development?

**Dr. Spiker:** You're totally right that good nutrition is so essential for children's development. It's essential for their physical development. It's important for their cognitive development. So are they getting all the micronutrients they need and all the fatty acids for their brains to really be working optimally? And it's also important for social development. Food insecurity it's about kind of the quantity of food. Is your household have enough? But it's also about the anxiety related to food. And that's something that a lot of people can relate to. You know, how does that feeling of anxiety around am I going to have enough food or is it the food that I want? Or is it food that I can acquire with dignity? Those things are so powerful.

**Zakiya:** This makes me think about food banks. You know, a lot of these food banks it's canned goods all the time. Which is great. Canned goods versus nothing is great, but also their high in sodium. You know, there's all these other considerations,.

**Titi:** Right.

**Zakiya:** What about perishables?

**Titi:** Lots of preservatives.

**Zakiya:** I think the other thing that I've noticed because I wanted to help out there is a great organization in our area called Martha's Table. But there's like certain hours where you can get food or drop food off. And it just makes me think, like, what if you're not available during that time?

**Titi:** What if you're working?

**Zakiya:** And there's lines at these food banks? yeah. There's so much demand. Like so you have to give probably your whole day to get to a food bank and they still may not be able to help you.

**Titi:** It's such a crazy time. And thinking about all this stuff, it just really gives you a perspective on all the levels of insecurity that are being activated right now.

**Zakiya:** It just ties right back to that episode on burnout. Right. This constant insecurity and worry about what will you have? What will you do? And a lot of times people doing burnout is

about something that's more luxurious, like, oh, I'm tired of typing, but it can be I'm tired of trying to figure out where my next meal is going to come from or how I'm going to feed my child. That can weigh on you and it can have physical effects. Yeah, it's about the basics, too. So what resources are even available for people experiencing food insecurity?

**Dr. Spiker:** Today we have SNAP, which is our food stamps. There were like earlier versions of federal benefits to help lift families out of poverty, give them some money to help close the gap and get the food that they need. Even those early versions of our federal food assistance had all these restrictions, like you could spend this food, but you couldn't spend it on seasonings. And it was sort of this idea that we don't want you buying any luxury purchases with the money that we've given you, as if people choosing the foods they want with dignity is a luxury when that's not a luxury. That's just basic human decency.

**Titi:** Folks should be able to use the assistance money that they get from whatever organization or the government to buy whatever they want for themselves and their family.

**Zakiya:** Yeah. No body should be policing what's in somebody's shopping cart. If I want to buy scallops, that's my business.

**Titi:** You should be able to do whatever you want to with that money to be able to feed your family the way you want to feed your family. It's like just because you get government assistance doesn't mean that you need to get poor nutrition.

**Zakiya:** I think one of the major things I remember about preparing for the pandemic and food for the pandemic is said this is a stressful time. You should always make sure you don't just get the basics, but also get comfort items. Now, why would we say this to everybody else and turn around to look at our most vulnerable groups and say, oh, everybody gets a comfort item, but not you?

**Titi:** Food is so much more than what we put into our bodies. It's about family. It's about culture and community. And everyone deserves to have access to those things.

**Dr. Spiker:** Right. Like being able to seek and choose the foods you want with dignity should be seen as so core. But that kind of argument from one hundred years ago about or people using their federal benefits to buy, you know, seasonings? Carries over today into or people using their snap to buy. What was it in the headlines a couple of years ago? It was like steak and lobster. People having all these conversations, should you be able to buy steak and lobster with SNAP? And so it's tough to move that lever of financial security because we have a lot of hang ups about that that we need as a country. We really need to do some work to figure out those hangups about why we have such a hard time supporting people, lifting people out of poverty in a dignified way that really respects them.

**Zakiya:** That dignity is so crucial to creating a better, more just food system. There's so much shame when it comes to food in general. What is it about having food stamps or shaming people who what they do or don't eat? I saw you got shamed recently.

**Titi:** Yes. Oh, my goodness. So I don't drink cows milk, and I've really been missin milk a lot. And so I said, OK, let me try and figure out some of these milk alternatives, see what they hitting for. So I grab some almond milk and it changed everything. I love almond milk. And so I posted on my Instagram on my Instagram story saying how, you know, almond milk has changed my life. I will put almond milk on everything . Then I was getting comments like but almond milk is so bad for the environment oh my God, and I was like, chile... anyways, like what? What now? What now was the problem now .

**Zakiya:** Here we go. You can never do enough. Doesn't matter that you reduce your carbon foot. Right. From what it takes to raise a cow and to sustain it to now an almond. But you did. You chose the wrong nut.

**Titi:** They are like you should drink oat milk. I'm like, I'm sure you will find something wrong with oat milk too.

**Zakiya:** And Sustainability is important to me as a consumer, but I'm like is hard to navigate around. Avoid this. Eat that. This is bad for water. This is bad for CO2. How am I supposed to figure it out.

**Titi:** Exactly. So we asked Dr. Spiker, what can we do as consumers to help contribute to a more sustainable food system?

**Dr. Spiker:** I think an important message for the public is that we need to reframe the way we think about sustainability and shift it from an individual frame to a systems frame. So sustainability shouldn't be something that you buy. It shouldn't be an issue of, you know, I'm a consumer with a lot of formal education and money, and I'm going to seek out the products that are labeled and branded as sustainable for myself.

**Zakiya:** And that's a great point. Sustainability shouldn't only be for rich people. Otherwise, it's not sustainable. And the other thing is, in some cases is above me is bigger than the consumer is deeper than rap.

**Dr. Spiker:** One example is, you know, if as a country, if everyone dial back their average per capita meat consumption, I don't think you would see fewer cows. I think what you would see is the same number of cows producing the same footprint. And I think you would just see a dramatically expanded export market. I think they would just find a market for that elsewhere.

**Titi:** Because of the relationship between supply and demand. Someone else in the world is going to consume that meat.

**Dr. Spiker:** So it's not like there's a direct line between what's on my plate and what's being produced. Oftentimes, it's a lot more convoluted. And so, again, if we go back to OK, maybe the whole goal with the cows is like we want to rein in our emissions, then, OK, that's opens up a different kind of conversation about how we do that.

**Zakiya:** We asked Dr. Spiker to break down the relationship between individual choices and systems change when it comes to sustainability.

**Dr. Spiker:** There is this really important interplay between the individual level and the systems. Global systems change doesn't just happen on its own. We're not going to wake up one day and suddenly the system is more sustainable. Systems change usually happens through some critical mass of pressure that comes from somewhere. And sometimes that pressure comes from regulatory frameworks. Sometimes that pressure is positive pressure because the financial incentives are lined up in the right way so that the financially viable thing is also the more sustainable thing.

**Titi:** So maybe if enough of us demand more sustainable food products, we'll create that market and it'll be a Win-Win for producers and consumers. Like the examples we were talking about earlier,.

**Zakiya:** As individuals are choices actually do have a lot of power in catalyzing systems that will change, but it don't want people to get so wrapped up in thinking about their individual footprint and their individual choices. And should I buy this or that that we forget about the big picture of how do we create a system that's more sustainable for everyone, not just more sustainable for me?

**Zakiya:** This really feels like wearing masks.

**Titi:** Yes,.

**Zakiya:** It's more than just one person.

**Titi:** Exactly.

**Zakiya:** You've got to protect the whole community to keep the most vulnerable people safe. And how can we create systems where everyone has access to detection and health at all times, but especially in times of the emergency?

**Dr. Spiker:** I think a more powerful question for individuals is not know which things should I consume A or B, but it's. Do I need A or B, how could I consume less overall? And how can we shift from always wanting more and more to. Maybe I just want enough.

**Zakiya:** That's it for lab 033. But we have so much more for you to dig into on our Web site. Check us out at [dopelabspodcast.com](http://dopelabspodcast.com)

**Titi:** on our website you can find a cheat sheet for today's lab along with a ton of other links and resources in the show notes.

**Zakiya:** And if you want to stay in the know dope labs, don't forget to sign up for our newsletter on our site, too.

**Titi:** Special thanks to our guest expert, Dr. Marie Spiker.

**Zakiya:** You can find her on Twitter @MarieSpiker and even more links to her work in our show Notes on [dopelabspodcast.com](http://dopelabspodcast.com). Also, we love hearing from you. What did you think about today's lab? Do you have ideas for Future Labs? Call us at 202-567-7028. And let us know.

**Titi:** you can find us on Twitter and Instagram @DopeLabspodcast.

**Zakiya:** Titi is on Twitter @Dr\_Tsho..

**Titi:** And you can find Zakiya @zsaidso.

**Zakiya:** Follow us on Spotify or wherever else you listen to podcasts.

**Titi:** Dope Labs is produced by Jenny Radelet Mast and Lydia Smith of Wave Runner Studios.

**Zakiya:** Mixing a Sound Design by Hannis Brown.

**Titi:** Our theme music is by Taka Yasuzawa and Alex Sugiura with additional music by Elijah 'LX' Harvey. Dope Labs is a production of Spotify and MegaOhm Media Group.

**Zakiya:** And it's executive produced by US.

**Titi:** Titi Shodiya.

**Zakiya:** And Zakiya Whatley.

**Titi:** I remember in high school, my first teacher brought in a huge Brie, and I had never seen anything like this before. I was in high school, had only had, like, American cheese up until that point. Maybe some Swiss, maybe some mild cheddar. She brought in this block of cheese And I was just like, that looks... That doesn't look good. She had all of these, like, crackers and stuff like that. And then she cut it open and all that cheese are to roll out. And I was like, Oh oui oui