



The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.

Food bank drive-through distribution during COVID-19: A reflective essay

Brittney N. Cavaliere ^{a *}
Foodshare, Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions

Carson Drew ^b
Johns Hopkins University

Katie S. Martin ^c
Foodshare, Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions

SPECIAL ISSUE COSPONSORED BY INFAS:
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS



Inter-institutional
Network for
Food and
Agricultural
Sustainability

Submitted September 29, 2020 / Revised December 31, 2020, and February 9, 2021 /
Accepted February 9, 2021 / Published online March 26, 2021

Citation: Cavaliere, B. N., Drew, C., & Martin, K. S. (2021). Food bank drive-thru distribution during COVID-19: A reflective essay. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 10(2), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.044>

Copyright © 2021 by the Authors. Published by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. Open access under CC-BY license.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented surge in food insecurity and demand for free food. In response, Foodshare, the regional food bank serving Greater Hartford, Connecticut, created a drive-through distribution program to meet the immediate food needs of residents. Our team at Foodshare's Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions conducted two surveys of people receiving food at the drive-through distribution to help inform Foodshare's programming and response to the pandemic. Results show that 70%

of households receiving food had never gone to a food pantry or other program to receive free food prior to COVID-19, and 67% said they come at least once a week. Additionally, 86% of guests are not going elsewhere to receive free food and only 37% know of other places to get free food. The majority of people receiving food at the drive-through distribution were people of color, who are those most affected by COVID-19 from both health and financial perspectives. From April to August 2020, Foodshare served an average of 1,500 households each day and more than 150,000 cars total at the drive-through distribution alone. Despite serving an immediate need for food, the drive-through model presents challenges, particularly during the New England winter with snow and freezing temperatures, and is an expensive endeavor. Foodshare and other food banks will need to pivot again from short-term pandemic assistance to longer-term approaches to create dignified, convenient, and sustainable access to

^{a *} *Corresponding author:* Brittney N. Cavaliere, Program Coordinator, Foodshare, Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions; 450 Woodland Avenue; Bloomfield, CT 06002 USA; +1-860-856-4309; bcavaliere@foodshare.org

^b Carson Drew, Undergraduate student, Department of Civil and Systems Engineering, Johns Hopkins University.

^c Katie S. Martin, Executive Director, Foodshare, Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions; kmartin@foodshare.org

healthy food for additional people struggling with food insecurity. Food banks can also leverage their extensive platforms of volunteers and donors to advocate for policy changes that will ensure economic stability and food security.

Keywords

Charitable Food, Food Bank, Food Insecurity, Food Pantry, Feeding America, COVID-19, Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis both highlighted and exacerbated the economic challenges of the average American. The pandemic exposed underlying income inequality and racial and ethnic health disparities that exist in this country. Many Americans were living paycheck-to-paycheck prior to the extensive economic disruption that began in March 2020. In a 2018 survey, the Federal Reserve found that 40% of Americans did not have the financial ability to cover an unexpected expense of US\$400 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2019). Foodshare is the regional food bank serving Greater Hartford, Connecticut. In Foodshare's service area of central and northeastern Connecticut, prior to COVID-19, 11% of households lived below the federal poverty line, and another 29% of households earned more than the federal poverty line but less than the basic cost of living for the area (Hoopes, Abrahamson, Leonard, & Treglia, 2018).

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 37 million people experienced food insecurity in the United States, meaning they did not "have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living" (Coleman-Jenson, Rabbit, Gregory, & Singh, 2019). Feeding America, the nation's largest anti-hunger organization with a network of 200 food banks, estimates that the number of people experiencing food insecurity will grow to 54 million due to the economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis (Feeding America, 2020a). In Greater Hartford, the number of people experiencing food insecurity is projected to increase by 41%, from 119,000 people to 167,000 in 2020 (Feeding America, 2020b).

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the

U.S., widespread business closures led to massive layoffs and furloughs across the country. More than 33 million people filed for unemployment benefits nationally over an eight-week period from mid-March to mid-May, compared to just over 1.5 million over the same period in 2019 (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration, n.d.). By June 2020, approximately 183,200 people in Connecticut were unemployed, higher than the number of unemployed during the peak of the Great Recession (Connecticut Department of Labor, Office of Research, 2020). Three months after the spike in unemployment claims began, delays continued and families were left without the income needed to pay rent or mortgage payments and utility bills, afford prescription medications, and purchase food (Rosenberg, 2020).

Racial and Ethnic Disparities Worsen Due to COVID

The COVID-19 crisis has disproportionately impacted communities of color from both health and financial perspectives, further exacerbating racial and ethnic disparities. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be part of the essential workforce. Compared to 16% of whites, 24% of Blacks and Hispanics are employed in the service industry, where employees often cannot work from home, thus increasing exposure to the coronavirus (Artiga, Garfield, & Orgera, 2020). The service industry also experienced deep job loss due to the pandemic. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are also more likely to have earned incomes that fall below the federal poverty line, making it more difficult to absorb an unexpected financial shock such as job loss or reduction in hours (Artiga et al., 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, BIPOC were more likely than whites to report concerns related to finances, such as worries about paying monthly bills and housing costs (Artiga et al., 2020). Job losses have hit Black people disproportionately across the U.S., with employment loss of 18% among Black workers compared to 16% among white workers (Gould & Wilson, 2020). BIPOC were also more likely than whites to experience food insecurity prior to the pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). As of April 2020,

food insecurity specifically due to the COVID-19 crisis was higher for BIPOC, with Black and Hispanic households with children almost twice as likely as white families to be struggling to get enough food to eat (Evich, 2020; NORC at the University of Chicago, 2020).

Charitable Response to Food Insecurity

While federal nutrition assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are the first line of defense against food insecurity, they often do not meet the full food needs of American families. The charitable food system, composed of food banks, food pantries, and meal programs, helps to fill this gap by distributing billions of pounds of free food each year to households in need. In fiscal year 2020, Foodshare distributed enough food for nearly 14 million meals (one-third of which was fresh produce) through its 260 partner food pantries, meal programs, and Mobile Foodshare, pantry-on-wheels sites (Foodshare, 2020). We also operate a SNAP outreach program to help low-income households apply for SNAP benefits. Additionally, the Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions at Foodshare serves as a resource for the charitable food system by promoting evidence-based programs, conducting research, and building capacity to promote health and long-term solutions to hunger.

Limitations to Charitable Food

The food banking system has expanded over the past 40 years, and it is important to note several concerns about and limitations of the current system's structure. COVID-19 has exposed structural inequalities and systemic injustices that disproportionately increase food insecurity for certain groups, particularly women and BIPOC. Critics argue that charitable food is a short-term response and does not address those underlying, "upstream" factors that contribute to food insecurity. For example, some claim that food banks rely on corporate food donations and fail to hold these companies accountable for low wages and other policies that may contribute to food insecurity (Fisher, 2018). Others argue that food banks take pressure off the government to address food insecurity and ensure its citizens have sufficient food (Riches,

2018). Others highlight how food pantries can create stigma and blame for those seeking assistance rather than focus on food justice and equity (deSouza, 2019).

Many food banks recognize these limitations, and some are working to change the system by advocating for living wages (Oregon Food Bank, n.d.), and promoting holistic food pantry programs that build stability and long-term food security (Martin, Redelfs, Wu, Bogner, & Whigham, 2019; Sanderson, Martin, Colantonio, & Wu, 2020). Feeding America created the Ending Hunger Community of Practice, of which Foodshare is a member, to help address structural barriers to food security. While the pandemic creates an opportunity for food banks to increase their advocacy efforts, the unprecedented surge in demand for food during COVID-19 has prompted many food banks, including Foodshare, to respond quickly with new types of food distribution and outreach to meet the immediate needs of residents.

Foodshare's Response to Increased Need for Food Assistance

Foodshare and our partner programs were met with numerous challenges in responding to the increased need for food assistance during COVID-19. At Foodshare, we depend heavily on volunteers, many of whom were not available due to health concerns related to COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, 20% of our partner programs (51 out of 260) decided to close. These were mostly meal programs where people congregate in large groups and school programs because schools had to shut down. Several food pantries also closed at least temporarily due to concerns about health and safety or lack of volunteers. These closures created a major gap in the local network, which our team sought to fill. However, we were challenged in transforming our typical food distribution methods to accommodate safety measures in response to COVID-19. In response, we created a drive-through distribution site to allow for social distancing and safety based on guidelines provided by Feeding America, guidance from the state, and the CDC.

Starting in early April and through August 2020, we operated a drive-through distribution site

five days a week from 8:30 am to 12:00 pm at a football stadium in East Hartford, Connecticut, that had the parking capacity to host a large influx of cars, staging areas, and distribution trucks. Our communications team leveraged its experience with traditional media and social media to raise awareness of the distribution among those affected by COVID-19, as well as to recruit new food donors, financial donors, and volunteers. Many of our volunteers who were senior citizens or from corporate groups had to cancel during COVID, leading staff to update the Foodshare volunteer website to recruit new volunteers to sign up for the drive-through program. People who were newly out of work or working from home with a flexible schedule became the new volunteer base, thanks in large part to the media attention drawn to the drive-through distribution.

Approximately 20 volunteers assisted at the food distribution each day. Cars lined up as early as 7:00 am and were assigned a line to join based on when they arrived. When the distribution started, people opened their car trunks, and volunteers wearing masks and gloves placed food in the car while assuring safety measures were followed. Clients who took the bus to the distribution site were also served in a socially distanced way.

The drive-through distribution was a new food program for Foodshare, and with so many new people coming to receive food, it created a natural experiment. Recognizing that the drive-through distribution would not be a permanent program, our team at Foodshare's Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions conducted two surveys of people receiving food at the drive-through to inform Foodshare's programming and outreach during the COVID-19 crisis. The goals of the surveys were to understand who was seeking help from Foodshare, where they were coming from, and how they have been affected by COVID-19.

Charitable Food Response during COVID-19

Feeding America reports that there was a 60% increase in food bank visitors across its network as of August 2020 compared to all of 2018 (Stanger, 2020). From March 2020 to August 2020, Feeding America coordinated a Client Impact Survey to gather data from people receiving food from food

banks and pantries using a 3-item questionnaire. Using a convenience sample, 17 food banks administered the survey and over 10,000 clients participated. Internal results from Feeding America showed that almost half (49%) of respondents had not received free food prior to COVID-19. Many food banks nationally have responded to the rise in need by creating similar drive-through distribution programs, including Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County and Roadrunner Food Bank in New Mexico, to name a few (Elattar, 2020; Morello, 2020). However, to our knowledge, no research has been conducted to examine the demographic characteristics and challenges of those being served at drive-through food distributions. This study helps fill a gap in the literature.

Methods

We conducted surveys of guests coming to Foodshare's drive-through program at two points in time. Data collection occurred between April 10 and May 11 for the first survey, and July 15 to 17 for the second. We asked a few of the same questions across both surveys, but most questions were different to help inform Foodshare's programming and ongoing response to the pandemic at these two different times. Although data were collected at two points in time, they are treated as independent samples rather than a longitudinal study because no identifying information was collected from participants.

We identified survey respondents using a convenience sample of guests receiving food at Foodshare's drive-through program. Our staff and trained volunteers approached guests in their vehicles while they waited in line to receive food. We informed guests about the purpose of the survey and asked if they would be willing to participate. When a guest preferred to answer the survey in Spanish, a Spanish-speaking member of the team administered the survey. When guests were not interested or declined to participate, we thanked them and moved on to other cars. Our team conducted the surveys via SurveyMonkey on smart phones, which took on average three minutes to complete. The questions were closed-ended, but when guests offered additional feedback, we also captured qualitative data. We conducted the sur-

veys for program improvement purposes and did not collect any identifying information. We informed people that they did not have to participate or answer any questions they did not want to answer.

Research Questions

The goal of both surveys was to help inform Foodshare's programmatic response to COVID-19 at different points in time, so questions differed considerably. From April to May, our first guest survey was designed to understand the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on guests. The second survey, conducted in July, focused more on determining how we could best serve guests in the coming months, whether through an extension of the drive-through distribution program or in partnership with community food pantries in our network.

Demographics

Survey respondents across both surveys were asked about their race, ethnicity, and if they had children under 18 living in their household. We also asked guests what town they live in so that we could identify the geographic reach of the drive-through distribution. In the first survey, we asked if respondents had adults over age 60 living in their household.

Food Pantry Usage and the Financial Impact of COVID-19

We asked survey respondents in both surveys if anyone in their household had ever gone to a food pantry, Mobile Foodshare site, or other program to get free food before COVID-19. We also asked guests in the first survey whether they had experienced any income loss due to the COVID-19 crisis and if they had had to choose between paying for food and paying for other bills in the prior month. In the second survey, we asked how often guests visit the drive-through distribution site and if they were picking up food for more than one household.

Program Improvement

Recognizing that the drive-through program provides short-term assistance, in the first survey, we asked respondents if they would be interested in

talking with a coach to help with applying for other assistance and setting and working toward financial and other goals. The second survey focused more on knowledge and use of other food distribution sites. We asked guests if anyone in their household currently goes to other food pantries, if they know about other programs in their area where they can get free food, and if they would be willing to go to other sites to get food if we provided them with more information.

Data Analysis

Data were collected via SurveyMonkey, exported to Excel, and then imported into PAWS (SPSS v.18.0). Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were reported to describe the overall sample. χ^2 tests and Spearman correlations were used to assess bivariate associations. We also created a map in Python to display from which towns guests came. The Plotly library of functions was used to create the map's style, and shapefile data was taken from data.ct.gov.

Results

From April through August at the new drive-through program, Foodshare served an average of 1,500 households each day and more than 150,000 cars total. We distributed more than five million pounds of food at the drive-through distribution alone. Our partner programs team also monitored food pantry closures closely and worked with partners to provide personal protective equipment and additional volunteers to help distribute food. By the end of August, only 23 programs (9%) remained closed. In the spring, 513 unduplicated respondents participated in the survey, and in the July survey, 892 unduplicated respondents participated.

Respondent Characteristics

In both surveys, the majority of the sample identified as BIPOC. Household demographics are provided in Tables 1 and 2 for the two surveys. The spring survey's respondents were 38% Black and 28% Hispanic, while July respondents were 29% Black and 34% Hispanic. About half the sample in each survey were households with at least one child under the age of 18 (50% of respondents in the

spring survey and 51% in the July survey). Additionally, households with a member over age 60 accounted for 47% of the sample in the spring survey.

Food Pantry Usage and the Financial Impact of COVID-19

At both points in time, approximately 70% of households had never gone to a food pantry or other program to receive free food prior to the COVID-19 crisis, composing 68% of the sample in the spring and 71% in July. During the survey in April and May, 72% said that someone in their household had lost a job or had hours cut due to the pandemic, and 69% reported they had to choose between paying for food and paying other bills during the prior month. One guest said, “Having to pay your rent and light bills, those things you have to do and you have to balance paying those bills versus eating. Having the food available can eliminate that stress and that anxiety of wondering how you’re going to eat or how you’re going to provide for your family. I think just one less stressor is always a plus.” Another guest commented, “The food helps me focus on paying other bills.”

The majority of respondents (58%) to the spring survey said they would be interested in talking with a coach over the phone to help apply for state and federal benefits and setting and achieving financial and other goals. One guest said, “It would help to talk to a coach to determine what money to put where for essential bills.”

In the July survey, 15% of respondents said it was their first time going to the drive-through food distribution since it opened in April. Nearly half (47%) of guests in July said they were picking up food for more than one household, further demonstrating the increased need for free food in Foodshare’s community. One survey re-

spondent who visited the drive-through distribution multiple times a week said, “It is a blessing to help others. They don’t drive, so I provide for them daily.”

Table 1. Results of Spring Survey (N=513)

Characteristic	N (%)
Kids under age 18 in household	256 (50)
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latinx	144 (28)
Black/African American	193 (38)
White	150 (30)
Asian	10 (2)
Other	10 (2)
Adult over age 60 in household	240 (47)
Lost job/wages lost due to COVID-19	360 (72)
Choose between food and other bills in past month	355 (69)
Never received charitable food	351 (68)
Interested in talking with a coach to set goals	
Yes	261 (58)
Maybe/not sure	29 (7)

Table 2. Results of July Survey (N=892)

Characteristic	N (%)
Kids under age 18 in household	416 (51)
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latinx	271 (34)
Black/African American	232 (29)
White	231 (29)
Asian	37 (5)
Other	35 (4)
How often pick up food	
First time coming	131 (15)
2–3 times per month	154 (18)
Once per week	243 (28)
2–3 times per week	268 (31)
4–5 times per week	72 (8)
Pick up for other household	402 (47)
Never received charitable food	593 (71)
Currently going to other food pantries	118 (14)
Currently know about other food pantries	278 (37)
Willing to go to other food pantries	657 (83)

When asked in July how often they visit Foodshare's drive-through distribution site, 67% of guests responded they come at least once a week. Residents of East Hartford, the town where the distribution site is located, were more likely to pick up food more than once a week compared to people living outside of East Hartford (44% compared to 37%, $p < .05$). Hispanic households were also more likely to visit the distribution more than once a week compared to other ethnic groups (45% compared to 35%, $p < .01$).

Program Improvement

The survey in July focused on how best to serve households in need of food over the coming months. Results showed that 86% of respondents were not going to other programs to get free food outside of the drive-through distribution, and only 37% knew of other programs in their area. Hispanic households were less likely to know about other food pantries or meal programs compared to other ethnic groups (30% compared to 42%, $p < .01$). A guest who speaks Spanish said, "Because I do not speak English, it is difficult to communi-

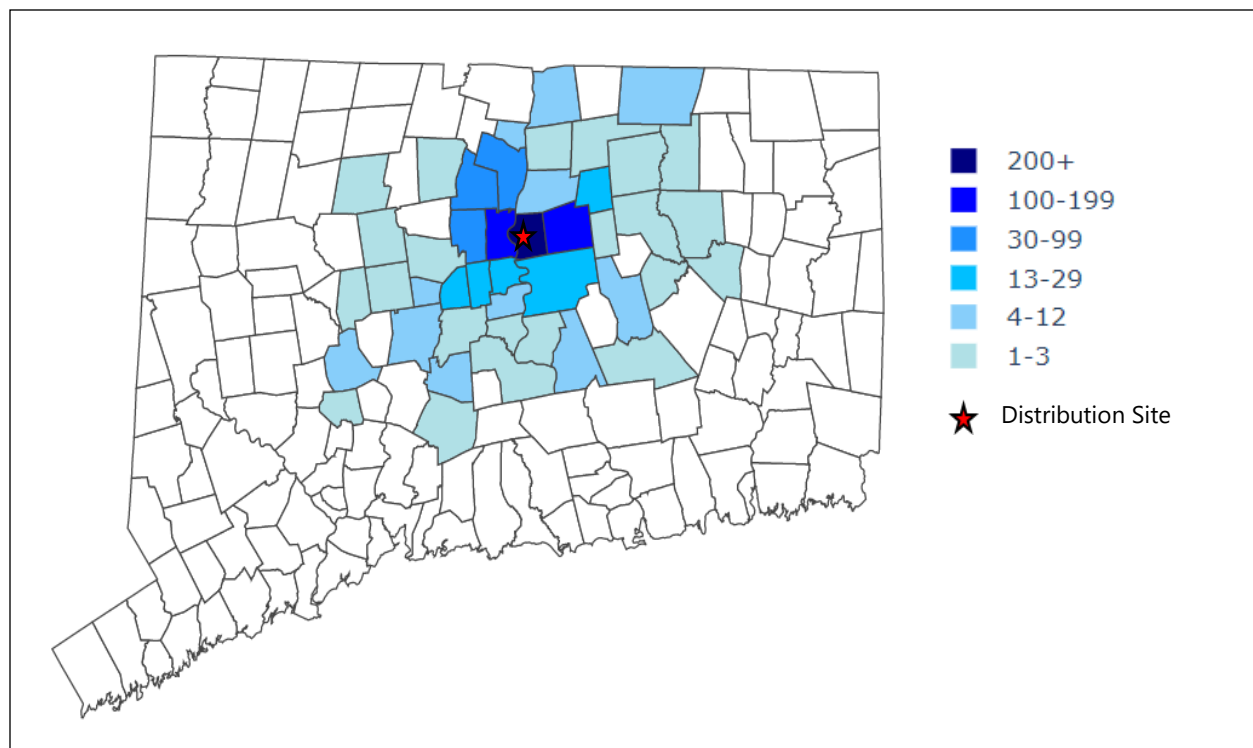
cate at other food pantries. I like staying in my car because it removes the barrier."

We asked respondents in the July survey if they would be willing to go to other food pantries and programs if Foodshare provided them with information, and 83% said yes. One guest described how "The coronavirus is taking away the stigma of getting help." Guests to our drive-through also commented on the kindness of the staff and volunteers. One guest said, "The people are very warm. That makes me feel comfortable to come back." Another guest commented, "The people here are extremely gracious. They don't make me feel less than, and that's really important. The day they make me feel less than, I wouldn't be coming." One guest said they'd want to see the "same type of friendly environment with people talking about us in a good way" at other food pantries.

Geographic Reach

The majority of the sample in both surveys resided in five towns in Foodshare's 42-town service area, and 5% of the sample resided outside Foodshare's service area. Figure 1 shows the towns from which

Figure 1. Number of Cars Visiting Foodshare's Drive-Through Distribution by Town



guests to the drive-through distribution came. In the spring, households from 28 towns were represented, with 74% from five towns. Similarly, in July, survey respondents resided in 30 of Foodshare's service area, with 79% coming from six towns. The main towns represented are most convenient to the drive-through distribution location, and 36% of respondents in the July survey said the convenient location of the distribution site was one of the most helpful qualities.

Limitations

This project has limitations that are worth mentioning. Surveys were meant to inform Foodshare's programmatic response to the growing need for food in the Greater Hartford, Connecticut, region. We used convenience samples for both surveys, and we only conducted the surveys at Foodshare's one drive-through distribution site, weakening the generalizability of the findings to other clients or other distribution programs. There are also limitations to this type of food distribution model. Most importantly, a drive-through distribution system typically requires access to a car. The temporary nature of the program is also expensive, requiring the hiring of staff to direct traffic and the renting of tents and trailers to store food.

Discussion

Our survey findings demonstrate the new demand for free food caused by COVID-19, the impact the pandemic has had on residents in Greater Hartford, and Foodshare's response. With many Americans living paycheck to paycheck before the pandemic started, it is not surprising that a nationwide emergency could expand food lines so drastically. The Foodshare team has adjusted to increased demand before, but the COVID-19 crisis presented new challenges and a significantly deeper need. At the start of the pandemic, staff focused quickly on logistical operations to set up the drive-through model to distribute additional food. In times of emergency, research tends to be overlooked while attention is focused on basic needs. Early data about the people served was helpful to inform donors, staff, and board members about the scope of the need and who we were serving, which led to new outreach and programming.

The majority of people coming to our drive-through distribution site had never received food from a food pantry before. They may have experienced food insecurity and may have participated in federal food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, or school meals, but most were receiving charitable food for the first time. A surprisingly large percentage of people (15%) in July came to our distribution site for the first time. It is possible this is because they tried to exhaust other resources before reaching out for help. The data demonstrate that the increased need for free food was not relenting, and Foodshare was serving a new population of people—many of whom were unaware of other charitable food programs in the area.

Following the survey in May, we used the findings to provide outreach and raise awareness about additional services, including SNAP, health insurance, United Way's 211 system of social service programs, voter registration, and information about Foodshare's network of mobile pantries and partner food pantries. Our staff and volunteers handed out informational postcards and promoted the same information using social media. Our SNAP outreach team visited the distribution site numerous times to talk to people about SNAP and inform them of Foodshare's application assistance program. We are helping to support our network of existing food pantry programs to serve additional households by recruiting additional volunteers and providing additional food. We are also using the geographic data to identify towns with great need and help connect individuals to other programs in those towns. In March through June 2020 alone, Foodshare spent US\$1.5 million on purchased food, compared to US\$350,000 in the entire prior fiscal year, to meet the need for free food in Greater Hartford. In response to COVID-19, we estimate we will distribute 19 million meals' worth of food during 2020, a 72% increase over 2019. Our SNAP outreach team assisted over 1,100 households in applying for SNAP benefits between March and December 2020, nearly a 200% increase compared to all of 2019.

Longer-term Lessons

The pandemic presents an opportunity for food banks and food pantries to reduce stigma and offer

a welcoming environment to assist households receiving charitable food for the first time, and to ensure that people feel comfortable coming back for assistance. Each morning before the drive-through distribution, volunteers were gathered for a pep talk, and staff encouraged them to show their empathy so that guests would feel comfortable coming back if they needed. As the pandemic continues, it will be important to incorporate and reinforce these values through trainings and communications in other distribution sites.

The drive-through distribution model created by Foodshare and many other food banks is a temporary and emergency response, involving rental tents and trucks, temporary staff hired for traffic control, and COVID precautions. This model presents challenges, particularly during the New England winter with its snow and freezing temperatures, and is an expensive endeavor. As the pandemic persists, we, along with other food banks, will need to continue to adjust our operations and pivot from short-term pandemic assistance to longer-term approaches. For example, several food banks are utilizing an OrderAhead¹ system using technology to allow individuals to order food from the food bank and reserve a pickup time and location (Northern Illinois Food Bank, n.d.). Foodshare is considering this option to reduce the costs of the drive-through program, and reduce the potential stigma and inconvenience of waiting in line at drive-through distributions.

Providing Wrap-around Services

While our drive-through program provided short-term supplies of food, results from the spring survey show that the majority of guests would be interested in talking with a coach to set goals and be connected to other programs due to the financial challenges presented by the pandemic. Food banks and pantries can serve as an access point to additional wrap-around services, because it takes more than food to end hunger. Food banks can explore programs that use coaches or case management to connect people to other important resources in the community to help them get back on their feet (Martin et al., 2019; Sanderson et al.,

2020). In response to the spring survey results, our team at Foodshare's Institute began partnering with Feeding America and two other food banks to offer a virtual coaching program with referrals to additional services and supports.

Addressing Racial Disparities and Reducing Barriers


The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted and exacerbated racial and ethnic disparities in health, income, and food security. It is more important than ever for the charitable food system to consider how to reduce these disparities and to create long-term food security. Our survey results confirm trends in food insecurity and racial and ethnic disparities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of people receiving food at our drive-through distribution site were BIPOC, the same population disproportionately experiencing food insecurity prior to the current crisis. More food banks and food pantries should consider advocating for stronger federal programs, including a higher minimum wage, to address the root causes of hunger that are the result of systemic inequalities in America.

As the media published images of massive lines of cars receiving food, our food bank benefited from new volunteers and financial support. We engaged new donors who may not have recognized the prevalence and impact of food insecurity prior to the COVID-19 crisis, and a new base of volunteers joined the team. Food banks can leverage this newfound interest by highlighting the underlying causes of food insecurity. Food banks and food pantries have an opportunity to further their impact beyond food distribution by addressing the root causes of hunger. The systemic injustices that continue to deepen in America—from racism to income inequality—are key contributors to food insecurity. Food banks can help tell this story and advocate for living wages and systems change to create long-term solutions to hunger. Historically, food banks have often remained apolitical, not engaging in policy debates. COVID-19 and a surge in food insecurity highlight the need for stronger advocacy and involvement in the policy arena. The Oregon Food Bank can serve as an important

¹ <https://www.orderahead.org/>

model for other food banks in this regard.

The charitable food system has flaws, yet COVID-19 has demonstrated that food banks and pantries are essential frontline services for millions of Americans. The pandemic has shown how nimble and flexible the charitable food system can be. Thousands of people in Greater Hartford who were affected by COVID-19 sought food assistance for the first time. Our team at Foodshare quickly responded to an unprecedented need for food, engaged new donors and new volunteers, and created a new distribution model. Without this response, more families would have suffered financially, physically, and emotionally.

Now is the time for food banks to continue to innovate. Foodshare and other food banks will need to pivot again to boost the capacity of our networks to create dignified, convenient, and sustainable access to healthy food for additional people struggling with food insecurity. Food banks can leverage their extensive rosters of volunteers and donors to advocate for policy changes that will ensure economic stability and food security. The challenges of COVID-19 present opportunities for the charitable food system to ensure that our work does not deepen racial and ethnic disparities but instead works to alleviate them. 

References

- Artiga, S., Garfield, R., & Orgera, K. (2020). *Communities of color at higher risk for health and economic challenges due to COVID-19* (Issue brief 04-07). Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/communities-of-color-at-higher-risk-for-health-and-economic-challenges-due-to-covid-19/>
- Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. (2019). *Report on the economic well-being of U.S. households in 2018*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Retrieved from <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2018-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201905.pdf>
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbit, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2019). *Household food security in the United States in 2018* (Economic Research Report No. 270). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/94849/err-270.pdf?v=9013.3>
- Connecticut Department of Labor, Office of Research. (2020). *Unemployment rate/Residents unemployed—State of Connecticut*. Retrieved from <https://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/unemploymentrate.asp>
- deSouza, R. T. (2019). *Feeding the other: Whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001>
- Elattar, H. (2020, April 18). Weekly drive through food pantry services options offered in Orange County. *Voice of OC*. Retrieved from <https://voiceofoc.org/2020/04/weekly-drive-through-food-pantry-services-options-offered-in-orange-county/>
- Evich, H. B. (2020, July 6). Stark racial disparities emerge as families struggle to get enough food. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/06/racial-disparities-families-struggle-food-348810>
- Feeding America. (2020a). *The impact of the coronavirus on food insecurity* (Impact brief 04-22). Retrieved from https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brief_Impact%20of%20Covid%20on%20Food%20Insecurity%204.22%20%28002%29.pdf
- Feeding America. (2020b, June 3). *The impact of the coronavirus on food insecurity*. Retrieved from <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>
- Fisher, A. (2018). *Big hunger: The unholy alliance between corporate America and anti-hunger Groups*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10987.001.0001>
- Foodshare. (2020). *Foodshare annual report, July 2019–June 2020*. Retrieved from http://site.foodshare.org/site/PageServer?pagename=annual_report
- Gould, E., & Wilson, V. (2020). Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality (Report 06-01). Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://files.epi.org/pdf/193246.pdf>
- Hoopes, S., Abrahamson, A., Leonard, M., & Treglia, D. (2018). *ALICE: A study of financial hardship in Connecticut: 2018 Report*. Connecticut United Way. Retrieved from <https://alice.ctunitedway.org/downloadreport/>

- Martin, K. S., Redelfs, A., Wu, R., Bogner, O., & Whigham, L. (2019). Offering more than food: Outcomes and lessons learned from a Fresh Start food pantry in Texas. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 14(1–2), 70–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2018.1512925>
- Morello, P. (2020, May 4). COVID-19 means a ‘new normal’ [Blog post]. Feeding America Hunger Blog. Retrieved from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/covid-19-means-new-normal>
- NORC at the University of Chicago. (2020). *COVID Impact Survey: Week 1, national findings*.
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e8769b34812765cff8111f7/t/5eaa8da80320e177b4b53df/1588263150276/covid_topline_national_WK1.pdf
- Northern Illinois Food Bank. (n.d.). *My Pantry Express*. Retrieved December 27, 2020 from <https://solvehungertoday.org/my-pantry-express/>
- Oregon Food Bank. (n.d.). *A national leader*. Retrieved December 27, 2020 from <https://www.oregonfoodbank.org/about-us/our-story/national-leadership/>
- Riches, G. (2018). *Food bank nations: Poverty, corporate charity and the right to food*. Abingdon, UK, & New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315184012>
- Rosenberg, E. (2020, July 13). Workers are pushed to the brink as they continue to wait for delayed unemployment payments. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/07/13/unemployment-payment-delays/>
- Sanderson, J., Martin, K. S., Colantonio, A. G., & Wu, R. (2020). An outcome evaluation of food pantries implementing the More than Food framework. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 15(4), 443–455.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2020.1748782>
- Stanger, T. (2020, November 2). Hunger crisis: 1 in 5 Americans turning to food banks. *Consumer Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.consumerreports.org/food/americans-turning-to-food-banks-during-the-pandemic/>
- U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration. (n.d.). *Unemployment insurance weekly claims data*. [Data set]. Retrieved August 11, 2020 from <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/claims.asp>