



WhyHunger Analysis & Reflection: WhyHunger + Duke University World Food Policy Center “The Impact of COVID-19 on Hunger Relief Organizations” Survey Preliminary Results

Last Updated: May 12, 2021

I. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on families and individuals who were already struggling to make ends meet, especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Though official data on food insecurity rates in the U.S. for 2020 have yet to be released, the estimated impact is that the food insecure population skyrocketed from 35 million people pre-pandemic to [50 million at the height of the pandemic](#), an increase of about 47%. And the [predicted sustained impact](#) on food insecurity rates will likely remain for the foreseeable future at around 42 million, a 20% increase from 2019. In addition, since the beginning of March 2020, [more than 40 million](#) people have applied for unemployment benefits and millions more struggled with reduced pay, fewer hours and other financial hardships. These factors exponentially increased the nutritional needs of families, especially for the millions of low-income people living with chronic illness and impacted by health disparities, making them even more susceptible to COVID-19.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, [4 out of 5 U.S. workers lived paycheck to paycheck](#). Hunger is not a new problem in America. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the social injustices that have long existed at the root of hunger, from racism to the lack of a living wage. With tens of thousands of private charitable non-profit organizations on the front lines of ensuring people who are in need get access to food, coping through this pandemic has both presented many challenges and amplified existing issues around food insecurity in America. At the same time the exigencies of this crisis have fostered innovation and provided opportunities to create systemic solutions.

The 200 regional food banks that operate under the umbrella of [Feeding America](#) and the [60,000+ food pantries, soup kitchens and other food access organizations across](#)

[the country](#) make up what it is commonly referred to as the Emergency Food System (EFS) -- despite the *chronic* need for its services over the past five decades. The results of the Survey underscore that food insecurity in America, which has [hovered between a contemptible 11–12% since the Great Recession](#), cannot be surmounted by the well-funded and highly sophisticated current network of private charitable food distribution institutions and services.

Though food banks should not be dismantled in the face of the staggering increase of food insecurity brought on by this pandemic, the preliminary results of this [recent survey](#) conducted by WhyHunger and the [Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center](#) reveal what is at stake if we do not examine the ways in which these organizations have been forced to pivot to meet the skyrocketing need.

II. About the [Survey](#)

WhyHunger and the Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center distributed a survey to thousands of emergency food providers between the end of August and November 2020 exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Emergency Food System in the U.S. The survey set out to learn about the following:

1. The actions, needs, barriers, and successes of organizations providing access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The potential long-term shifts in organizational policies, practices, programs as a result of providing food access during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Recommendations for systemic change in the food system highlighted by this crisis and local/state/federal policy to support those changes long-term.

More than 200 hunger-relief organizations -- categorized for the purposes of the survey as food banks (large state- or regions-wide organizations with large warehouses and fleets of trucks for the purposes of providing food directly to clients as well as distributing food to member frontline organizations), frontline organizations (community-based food pantries and soup kitchens that distribute food directly to people in need), and advocacy organizations (those focused on policy changes at multiple levels to ensure hunger relief) -- responded to the survey. Here is an overview of some of the results and initial analysis. A graphic depiction of the preliminary results is available [here](#). Additional results and a full report published by the Duke University World Food Policy Center will be issued later this year!

III. Preliminary Results

- (1) An increase in demand and loss of volunteers due to COVID-19 resulted in the need to narrow services to primarily food distribution.**

Among all of the emergency food organizations in the U.S. who participated in this survey:

- Over 75 percent experienced an increased demand for their services.
- Around 30 percent had to establish additional services to meet the uptick in demand. We asked organizations to indicate what operational changes they had to make as a result of COVID-19. The majority of changes were aimed at helping organizations deal with the dangers of contracting COVID-19 while also meeting an increased need for food such as:
 - Instituting Personal Protective Equipment or PPE requirements (85 percent) and COVID-19 tests among staff (52 percent)
 - Starting curbside pick-up (55 percent)
 - Moving from client choice to pre-packed food (55 percent)
 - Offering delivery or drop-off option (50 percent)
- At the same time, 54 percent had to suspend some of their programming, such as
 - Community meals
 - In-person trainings and events
 - School-related programs
 - Gardening

The majority of survey respondents reported that, due to the exponential increase in demand for food aid due to COVID-19, they had to suspend programming and services that went beyond soliciting and distributing food in order to protect the health of staff, volunteers and clients. In most cases, volunteer programs were suspended completely, pre-packed foods replaced client choice models and gardening and nutrition programs were put on pause. As volunteers were confined to their homes, it was all hands on deck for paid staff who donned PPE while they packed and handed out bags of food to families waiting in line, six feet apart at designated spots, or waiting in their cars.

(2) Organizations that were implementing programs that address the root causes of food insecurity pre-pandemic plan to return to and expand root cause work.

As a way to gauge how the pandemic might provide opportunities or barriers to accelerate the adoption of root causes strategies within the food bank sector, we asked the survey respondents how much time their organizations spent on activities

pre-COVID that went beyond food distribution to begin to tackle some of the root causes of persistent food insecurity and their plans to continue those same activities post-COVID. Results were compiled to discern if organizations said they would spend any time on these activities or no time. Data indicates that the pandemic illuminated the deeper systemic issues at the root of hunger and may suggest that, when pushed to their breaking point, even more emergency food providers are seeing not just value, but real necessity, to work at the root causes and supplement food distribution to include root-cause programming.

- The percent of organizations spending any time on fair wage advocacy campaigns increased, with 34 percent of organizations engaging in this activity before COVID-19 and 45 percent saying they will start or continue those activities post-COVID. Similarly, percentages increased for other advocacy work and organizing, increasing from 69 percent and 58 percent before COVID, respectively, to 74 percent and 64 percent post-COVID, respectively.
- 23 percent of organizations *started* advocacy and policy efforts to address root causes.

(4) Despite differences in organizational purpose and function, respondents generally identified the same weaknesses in the emergency food system, including dependence on volunteers and donations, and an unpredictable food supply chain. Frontline organizations also cited focus on food provision instead of root causes as a big weakness.

- 78% of all three types of organizations reported that their efforts to end hunger were weakened by a dependency on volunteers
- The most significant weakness reported by a majority of advocacy organizations (85%) was a lack of government support for root cause approaches.
- An unpredictable food chain supply topped the list for 88% of food banks
- Second only to dependency on volunteer assistance was a focus on food provision over root cause approaches for 68% of frontline organizations.

(5) Respondents also cited weaknesses in the general food system as contributing to food insecurity, such as inequities in access to and affordability of food, as well as a precarity of food supply chains coupled with an undervaluing of food workers. Structural racism in the food system also ranked high.

- Inequitable access to fresh, healthy food topped the list of weaknesses in the food system according to 80% of respondents.
- The undervaluing of essential food workers and their safety was cited by 75% of all organizations.
- Food affordability ranked third for 72% of organizations, followed closely by a precarity of supply chains at 70%.
- And even though over 60% of organizations identified structural racism as a weakness in the food system, only half shifted any programming to address racial inequities during the pandemic.

IV. From Early Days to Present: The Evolving but Entrenched Emergency Food System

In the late 1960s food banking was born from what could be construed [as a logical match-up](#) between food about to go to waste and people who had trouble feeding themselves and their families. Corporate partnerships were baked in from the very beginning as the suppliers of food waste. Grocery stores were early adopters, shored up with the promise of tax breaks and brand enhancement. The food banking model still leans heavily on this early scaffolding, though services and programs have been added to address issues in persistent food insecurity that emerged as a result of a downsizing of the federal safety net coupled with stagnant wages.

About two decades after the first food bank opened its door in the U.S., some organizations began to reflect on their goals to mitigate hunger and their efficacy with tactics that focused solely on food security. Organized private charitable food assistance received a big boost up in the 1980s when the prevailing ideology in Congress was that Americans should be encouraged to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and that food stamps and other handouts were a deterrent to the American spirit of ingenuity in service to the goal of self-reliance. The Food Stamp Program was cut and congressional legislation authorized the distribution of federal surplus commodities to non-profits that provided food to the needy.

Though mitigating food insecurity by capturing and distributing food waste is still at the heart of food banking, many organizations have expanded their strategies to include nutrition education, medically tailored meals, client choice, support in helping clients get access to government nutrition programs, gardening and food preservation classes, policy and advocacy to improve federal nutrition programs and other federal and state policies that fall under the guise of anti-hunger responses. And a smaller but growing subset are beginning to address root causes of food insecurity as part of their mission such as low wages, poor working conditions and structural racism.

Fast forward to the 2000's. In the wake of the world food crisis, the Great Recession and the continual shrinking of federal nutrition programs, community-based food pantries and regional food banks began to take note of a lack of space for convening with one another for shared learning and analysis leading to programs that could strike at the root causes of hunger. In 2013, [Closing the Hunger Gap \(CTHG\)](#) emerged as a network of organizations working to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote social justice and address the root causes of hunger. The last conference held in 2019 had more than a thousand people in attendance from almost every state in the country engaging in conversations, sharing challenges and successes in developing and implementing strategies that recognized racialized poverty as the root causes of hunger, and busting the “bootstraps” mythology. As noted in the rapid growth of members and increased engagement with CTHG, prior to COVID-19 [the adoption of root cause strategies by the emergency food sector](#) seems to be gaining ground.

V. Analysis: The Emergency Food System at a Crossroads

While food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and other food access organizations do admirable and necessary work, their contribution amounts to roughly [4% of the charitable response](#) to hunger in the United States (pre-pandemic). Government nutrition programs provide the rest of what we count as food distribution and access. Yet food banks occupy a mythic role in the popular imagination as the primary way in which needy people get food and the best way to help fight hunger, with more than [51% of all food access programs relying entirely on volunteers](#).

Since the March 2020 outbreak of COVID in the U.S., we have witnessed the private charitable food system pushed to its limits. For the first time since the Great Depression, the issue of hunger in the U.S. is discernible to all. News stories across the country have revealed [miles-long lines of cars and people](#) snaking around sidewalks and carparks to receive pre-packed boxes and bags of food. Food insecurity and its attendant issues, such as poor health related to racial disparities, are front and center in the public dialogue as growing numbers of “newly hungry” people have found themselves accessing emergency assistance as a result of job loss, delayed stimulus checks and other disruptions to the income generation. The compounding impact of the pandemic has hit hardest for BIPOC communities, who were disproportionately impacted by hunger and poverty already.

The survey's preliminary results, as outlined above, corroborate news reports that the pandemic has resulted in most emergency food provider organizations experiencing ongoing strain due to a significant increase in people seeking food assistance,

exacerbated by the loss of volunteers and the need to pivot to less dignified means of distributing food in order to keep everyone safe. Such consequences may be for the first time in modern history exposing the true extent – and root causes – of the hunger problem in the United States.

The preliminary results of the survey suggest that COVID-19 has brought us to a crossroads. In one scenario, a slow economic recovery coupled with an intransigence to increase the minimum wage and expand federal nutrition programs could result in the charitable Emergency Feeding System doubling down on efficiency, as was necessary during the pandemic, which narrowed the focus of the work to acquiring and distributing food in order to meet an unprecedented demand. In such a scenario, the Emergency Feeding System will likely have to continue prioritizing getting food quickly into the hands of families unable to meet their food needs while sacrificing the dignity that comes with client choice food pantries, access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other perishables, and the root cause work needed to actually solve the underlying problems.

In another scenario, with a new administration in the White House beginning to pass robust stimulus packages and calling on Congress to write and pass additional legislation to raise wages and spur economic recovery, food banks will be able to resume and, as most respondents to this survey indicated, increase their root cause programming. With the urgency of the crisis dialed back even just slightly, we could see organizations resuming programs that connect clients directly to SNAP, advocate for stronger federal nutrition programs and living wages, provide access to gardening, build connections with local farmers, and organize clients to advocate for solutions to the issues – in justice in health care, housing, education and systemic racism – that keep them impoverished. With the new public awareness of the hunger crisis and underlying issues, public support for root cause work could help fund these efforts and hold the government accountable to do the same.

The second scenario is the only one that will help us correct course and get back to the work of enlisting the anti-hunger sector to advocate for everyone living in the U.S. to have the basic human right to adequate food and nutrition. The preliminary results of the survey underscore that the private charitable emergency feeding system in the U.S., without engaging in root cause work, will never be able to make a real dent in the rate of food insecurity. And, even though food banks have grown increasingly sophisticated, efficient, and well-funded relative to other non-profit sectors, they were pushed to their limits during this pandemic.

It is not surprising, then, that more than half a century after the first food bank opened its doors, the U.S. has failed to solve its hunger problem. By simply defining the

problem as hunger, the approaches to ameliorate it have been largely limited to food access, which alone can only temporarily eliminate food insecurity. Ensuring the basic human right to nutritious food puts those most impacted by persistent poverty and food insecurity and their dignity at the center of defining the solutions for their communities to have, at all times and for future generations, both physical and economic access to food that is sufficient -- both nutritionally and culturally -- and environmentally sustainable.

A graphic depiction of the preliminary results is available [here](#).
Learn more at whyhunger.org

