

Executive Summary

Understanding the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on California's Emergency Food System

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Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented spike in demand for food assistance as well as numerous logistical challenges for food banks attempting to address the elevated need. Our study interviewed 30 individuals from 24 hunger relief organizations in California to document their challenges, opportunities, and adaptive strategies during the pandemic, in the hopes that their experiences may provide insights for those seeking to understand the state of the emergency food system and identify approaches for building greater resilience.

Common challenges

- Compared to pre-pandemic levels, most food banks reported **serving double or triple the number of people** during the pandemic. Widespread job losses led many people to seek help from food banks for the first time, especially people in the tourism or service industries that were hit the hardest by the state's stay-at-home order.
- Food banks around the country suffered **significant drops in volunteers** at the beginning of the pandemic, just as demand for food bank services surged.
- Food banks experienced multiple **supply chain disruptions**: grocery donations declined as retailers struggled to restock shelves, bulk donations from restaurants and institutions were difficult to sort and distribute, and food banks that attempted to purchase food often found themselves competing for limited supply or facing long delivery delays.
- Many food banks **lacked the infrastructure or staff** to sort, store, and distribute the sudden increases in food.
- Maintaining **safe conditions for staff and clients** was another significant challenge.
- Many respondents expressed concerns about **staff and volunteers burning out** because of the unsustainable pace of the pandemic response.

Adaptive strategies

- Many food banks engaged in **direct distribution** to households for the first time during the pandemic. Drive-thru distributions were a common strategy to serve large volumes of people with limited physical contact.
- The sheer volume of food being distributed by food banks during the pandemic often necessitated **expanding operational capacity**, including warehouse space, refrigerated storage, truck fleets, new programs, and IT infrastructure.
- Many food banks took advantage of **staffing assistance** from the California National Guard or other local organizations.
- Supply chain dynamics during the pandemic forced many food banks to **establish or increase food purchasing** programs.
- Many respondents credited their success at responding to the pandemic to an organizational culture of **flexibility, collaboration** with other food banks and partner agencies, and **lessons learned from previous disasters**.

Government policy responses

- Government support was critical for food banks to rapidly scale up their operations to serve the unprecedented need.
- The USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program was an important source of food for many food banks, though respondents also voiced criticism about its uneven geographic coverage and implementation.

- The California state government responded to the pandemic's impacts on food insecurity with several types of support, including staffing assistance (through the National Guard), food (through a state-funded emergency food box), and funding for capacity building.
- Many food banks established or strengthened relationships with county governments during the pandemic.

Food loss and waste

- Many food banks reported short-term increases in food loss at the beginning of the pandemic, when local restaurants and distributors offloaded inventories of perishable food after stay-at-home orders were implemented.
- However, most food banks experienced normal or reduced levels of food loss after the initial glut of donations.
- Pre-boxed food distributions (such as the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box program) may have shifted food waste to other parts of the supply chain.

Silver linings

- Heightened media visibility enabled food banks to build wider networks of support and address the stigma surrounding food assistance.
- The pandemic also offered a rare opportunity to advance broader strategic visions around the role of food banks in the community and other interrelated social issues, such as federal anti-hunger policies, community food systems, and racial justice.