

Survey of a Pilot Project on Food Banks in the United States

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Introduction

Since their establishment in the early 1970s food banks and food pantries (hereinafter collectively referred to as food banks) have become a fixture of welfare policy in the United States. The Food Bank Council of Michigan, for example, reported that nearly 3,000 agencies distributed more than 200,000 pounds of food and water to residents in that state in 2018. Scholars attribute their proliferation to the deepening of neoliberal policies that have favored corporate and nonprofit philanthropy in social welfare provision and a corresponding reduction and restructuring of public policies that have limited access by the poor to public sources of assistance, trends found in other developed democracies but especially prevalent in the United States. Food banks have proliferated within webs of increasingly sophisticated networks of public and private agencies – food manufacturers, local and state public welfare agencies, NGOs, churches, private philanthropic foundations (including corporations), and regional associations – that distribute food and other necessities to needy people. The smaller local food banks are especially reliant on volunteers at key points in these distribution networks.

The onset and spread of the covid-19 pandemic since 2020 undoubtedly affected food banks and the services they provide. Early reports, both academic [Farmer 2020; Byrne and Just 2022] and from food banks themselves, suggest two contradictory effects. First, supply and distribution operations were interrupted by the pandemic, and new methods of delivery to clients had to be devised in order to reduce the risk of infection. This reduced distribution capacity. Second, lockdowns and quarantines disrupted the economy, which led to higher unemployment and increased food insecurity among vulnerable populations. This resulted in increased demand for food bank services.

Based on this, the research poses the following main research question: how were food bank-related networks themselves affected by the pandemic? Were these effects temporary or long-term? A second research question follows from this. How did food banks and their partners change supply and delivery operations? Were these effects temporary or long-term? The primary research question probes for structural changes in these networks that might have been caused by the pandemic, the second question probes for tactical innovations at the final delivery stage.

Literature review

There is a robust academic literature on food banks and their evolution. One line of research traces the development of food banks in developed countries in the context of neoliberal restructuring of social welfare policies toward corporate and nonprofit charity [Gentilini 2013; Riches 2018]. This literature takes a critical stance on the subject, seeing the development of food banks as legitimating corporate and state policies that lead to food insecurity among poor people [for example, Lohnes 2019; Mendley-Zambo, Raphael, and Taman 2021]. Alternatively, Prendergast [2017] examines the economics of market mechanisms for food distribution through food banks. Yet another line of research traces the development of the food bank movement from addressing issues of disposal of food surplus to community development based on food justice and food sovereignty [Alkan and Mares 2012; Vitiello, Grisso, Whiteside, and Fischman 2015]. This literature, however, focuses on the operation of food bank-related networks in normal times.

Three studies have examined food banks in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Two used indirect means to measure the pandemic's impact: Byrne and Just [2021] conducted a telephone survey to ask food banks about demand, safety, and staff; and conducted an online survey that tracked unemployment and food bank use. Lee, Zhang, Nagya, and Marwah [2021] tracked donations to food banks during the pandemic. Farmer [2020] provided an initial descriptive account of problems food banks faced but did not analyze possible long-term effects.

None of these works, however, addresses the central theme of this research note, the durability of nonprofit organization networks during times of acute social and economic upheaval.

Methodology

The study combined archival research with face-to-face interviews with food bank staff and representatives of related agencies, site observation, and materials collection in California, southern Michigan, and southern Nevada. The first two states experienced high levels of infection and concurrent economic distress. In order to survey a range of organizations, interviews and site observations were conducted in the southern and central parts of California, southern Michigan, and southern Nevada. In California the study focused on Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties (southern), and San Francisco, Sonoma, and Tuolumne counties (central). These represent regions with different economic and demographic characteristics within the state. Research in Michigan will focus on the four counties surrounding Lansing, the state capital. Research in Nevada is restricted to Las Vegas, an urban center in which the tourism sector was highly affected by the pandemic.

The distribution of areas is hypothesized as important for the composition of food bank networks. Weir and Schirmer [2018] identified two "worlds of welfare" in the United States in which the characteristics of social welfare nonprofit organizations differ depending on whether they are in the

Northeast and Midwest or the West and South. The former tends to have a “civic-public” character while the latter is based on a religious and private mix of service provision. This may well have implications for understanding the agencies that work with food banks. Similarly, research has shown that donations to urban food banks are higher than those to banks in rural areas, and the latter face a variety of logistical obstacles to their operations [Youn, Ollinger, and Kantor 1999]. Sampling organizations in Western and Midwestern states and in urban and rural settings will allow the researcher to test these conclusions. The research was conducted from mid-August to mid-September, 2022.

Food banks as embedded institutions

Food banks are not stand-alone agencies and generally do not distribute food directly to clients. Several interviewees stressed that their bank will not refuse food to first-time walk-in clients but will direct them to affiliated food pantries nearest the clients’ homes for further service. At the same time they do not exclusively rely on food drives to obtain needed foodstuffs for distribution, rather they received supplies from a variety of external institutions. They should thus be seen as central clearinghouses for more or less complex networks of food providing and consuming institutions. These networks are composed of “upstream” suppliers and “downstream” consumers.

Suppliers are varied depending on the food bank, but the Food Share food bank in Oxnard, Ventura County, California, is representative (see figure 1). Supply sources included food directly purchased by the bank, food drives that target individual donors through periodic campaigns, retail stores such as supermarkets, agricultural producers that supply the banks directly or allow them to glean surplus following a harvest, and government agencies. The most prominent among the latter is the United States Department of Agriculture, which distributes surplus food to food banks, among other organizations, as a component of federal agricultural price stabilization policy. Finally, there are financial donors. The most prominent among these is Feeding America, the national umbrella organization with a membership of some 50,000 food banks. Feeding America makes grants for facilities improvement and food purchase. In addition, there are corporations and philanthropic foundations that make donations.

Downstream consumers of food bank distributions include food pantries (often religious institutions or agencies affiliated with them), shelters or group homes, school programs (after school programs or school lunch programs), drive-through operations (see below), congregate meal sites (for homeless or other needy clients), and operations such as Meals on Wheels that deliver food and meals to elderly shut-in clients.

Volunteers make up an important intermediary set of actors. While all food banks surveyed include professional full-time staff to manage operations, volunteers are a significant source of manpower for floor operations. At two sites visited during the research volunteers were present. At one site volunteers from a regional bank were sorting donated items while the author was being given a tour of the facility; at another retired volunteers had just finished a similar task.



Figure 1: Food Share supply stream

Issues encountered in food bank networks during covid-19

The covid-19 pandemic affected food banks in a number of ways. Per the above discussion of networks, we can divide the challenges they faced in terms of upstream, downstream, and internal issues. Unless otherwise noted the following is taken from the interviews conducted during the fieldwork.

Upstream issues

Food banks faced the following changes in supply networks. First, the composition of supplies changed. In particular, donations from individuals and retail establishments (grocery stores and supermarkets) were reduced. This was especially the case in the early period of the pandemic when consumers hoarded essential items out of fear that they would become unavailable. Grocery stores that had provided items no longer had the surpluses that food banks had come to rely on. Moreover, as individuals made fewer donations as they faced their own shortages resulting from lockdowns or

loss of employment. At the same time lockdown and social distance constraints made it more difficult to collect food items directly from individual donors. USDA supplies, a mainstay for many food banks, continued, but these are earmarked for school programs or Meals on Wheels-style distribution to elderly shut-ins and cannot be diverted to programs serving other kinds of clients. This necessitated increases in direct purchase of food items, with corresponding budgetary burdens. The respondent at Food Share, the food bank serving Ventura County on the California central coast, reported that the usual \$50,000 direct purchase budget had to be increased to \$250,000 to meet shortfalls from reductions in other supply sources.

One unexpected issue arose at this food bank. Financial donations from various donors increased during 2020 and 2021 but decreased in 2022 as government agencies announced the end of the pandemic. Demand for food, however, remained above pre-2020 levels (see below). As the respondent put it, the end of the pandemic did not signal the end of hunger in the region served by the bank, a conclusion often reached by donors.

Downstream issues

The most prominent issue food banks faced during the pandemic was significantly increased demand for food from clients who had lost jobs or faced reduced working hours. Respondents were nearly universal in replying that people who had not previously used food bank services found themselves doing so for the first time. Moreover, several interviewees pointed out that while the number of clients had decreased since 2021, they had not decreased to pre-2020 levels. At the same time, downstream partners faced lockdown orders just like other institutions. A common problem faced by the food banks investigated was closure of food pantries, which limited the ability to distribute food to clients. Distribution to school programs was also affected when schools temporarily closed or moved to online teaching.

An innovation to meet this problem was the introduction of drive-through food distribution when access to parking lots or other large spaces was available. Clients would drive up to a distribution point and remain in their vehicles while food bank staff placed groceries in the trunk. This eliminated the need for close face-to-face contact and allowed food banks to take up some of the slack from closed food pantries. Several interviewees also noted that this seemed to lessen the sense of stigma for using a food bank by clients who were using them for the first time.

Internal issues

Three main internal issues emerged from the interviews. The first was the reduction of volunteer labor due to lockdown and social distance considerations. This correspondingly placed logistical burdens on the organizations and full-time professional staff. The second was how to allocate staff tasks. The larger food banks (Las Vegas and Los Angeles) moved administrative staff to remote

work (one interviewee was still working remotely at the time of the interview). In the smaller food banks (Napa and Oxnard, for example) administrative staff continued to work on-site throughout. This created potentially a third issue, pointed out by the director of the Las Vegas operation, the division of staff between remote administrators and warehouse workers who had to remain on-site to actually receive and distribute foodstuffs. He mused whether that had affected esprit de corps and camaraderie among staff.

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Abstract

This research note investigates how the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic affected the organizational networks of food banks in the United States. The research posits that the pandemic has negatively affected the complex networks of food suppliers and food distributors that make up food bank networks. Using direct elite interviews with food bank and affiliated agency representatives, site observation, and materials collection the research will attempt to assess the extent to which food bank networks were affected during the pandemic and whether and how they have recovered.