

The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Watershed Moment to Strengthen Food Security Across the US Food System



See also Morabia, p. 1111, and the *AJPH* COVID-19 section, pp. 1123–1172.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a public health crisis across the globe. In a matter of weeks, the policies, systems, and environments shaping everyday life were transformed to accommodate social distancing, work and school from home, and business closures. These changes have been difficult but achievable for socioeconomically advantaged individuals but have only exacerbated long-standing disparities among low-income persons, the unemployed and underemployed, and people of color.

These disparities are especially pronounced across the US food system. Before COVID-19, 11.1% of Americans lacked consistent access to adequate food for an active, healthy life. In the midst of a pandemic characterized by decimated incomes, panic buying and food hoarding, disrupted supply chains, and a sharply reduced workforce, early data suggest that more than 38% of Americans are now at risk for food insecurity.¹ Inherent in this risk is a troublesome cascade, wherein food insecurity leads to poorer health outcomes, including noncommunicable disease, which is a risk factor for

the most severe COVID-19 symptoms.^{2,3}

Simultaneously, recommendations are in place for households to stock up on food and limit trips to the grocery store, an impracticable proposal for individuals who cannot afford to acquire large amounts of foods, have little space to store food, or live in communities without access to an abundant food supply. As one example, C. B. S. received the following correspondence from an individual representing a Montana nonprofit:

We are seeing a steep decline in food availability in indigenous communities. . . . One thing we are learning is that many of the food banks and local grocery stores are not getting the basic staples they need. . . . At the end of the supply line, these communities are already feeling the limits.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed moment for food systems—an opportunity to develop policy, systems, and environmental strategies to enhance food security, reduce inefficiencies, and decrease inequities, now and into the future. In the face of such tremendous transformation, there is knowledge to be gained

from various sectors of the food system that address food security.

Organizations that provide emergency food are one evident part of the food system that are urgently strengthening emergency preparedness to promote food security in response to COVID-19. Food banks and pantries have been forced to develop and implement emergency plans that have effectively overhauled existing operations to accommodate social-distancing guidelines and meet the sudden increase in demand. Changes to operations have included pre-packing emergency food boxes rather than allowing clients to select their own food, asking clients to remain outside rather than entering the building, furloughing volunteers, and implementing sanitation measures to protect workers and ensure food safety.

Although they are experiencing radical shifts in their operations, food banks and pantries

have had to flex to accommodate an even larger population than they did before the pandemic. Newly food-insecure individuals may be unfamiliar with locating, understanding, and navigating assistance, while also facing one of the primary logistical challenges experienced by all consumers during a pandemic—longer than usual queues and waiting times.

Additional COVID-19–related changes to emergency food-assistance programs include a renewed focus on cash donations versus food donations and reliance on purchased bulk food, rather than “rescued” food from grocery stores, producers, and manufacturers. Sadly, although the most vulnerable populations lack the access and resources to acquire food to meet basic needs, the largest farms in the United States are destroying tens of millions of pounds of fresh food that they can no longer sell because of disrupted supply chains.⁴ Many farmers have donated at least part of these surpluses to food banks and other charitable organizations. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how much charitable organizations can absorb and what producers are able to harvest, process, and transport.

Other food-assistance programs are also being reshaped in real time. The US Department of

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IMMEDIATE QUESTIONS TO EXAMINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO STRENGTHEN FOOD SECURITY ACROSS THE US FOOD SYSTEM

Is the increase in food consumed at home adequate, safer, affordable, and healthier for everyone?

How does unemployment affect reliance on food-assistance programs and dietary quality?

What key factors do businesses, organizations, and institutions need to plan for to meet the food needs of individuals during a public health emergency?

What are the safest strategies to distribute food in essential places of service, such as grocery stores, medical facilities, and schools?

What types of foods in the food supply are least accessible to consumers, especially in areas with current low access to healthy food?

What are the relationships between food insecurity, poorer health outcomes, and more severe COVID-19?

Which foods and nutrients are most critical to support the health of food-insecure individuals during a public health emergency?

How are workers across the food system being prepared, protected, and compensated to safely provide food to the public during a pandemic?

How do we best prepare distribution chains to manage sudden and increased demands on the food supply?

What policies, systems, and environmental approaches best address the food security needs of our most vulnerable populations (e.g., elderly, children) and communities (e.g., rural, tribal nations)?

Agriculture (USDA) is providing flexibility and contingencies to ensure food security across several programs.⁵ Schools across the nation have been granted waivers to serve meals and snacks to students outside the cafeteria and use strategies, such as grab-n-gos, drive-throughs, and food deliveries to meet the needs of local communities. Additional funding is being provided to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children to meet increased program demand. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is allowing states to provide emergency allotments to bring all households up to the maximum benefit for up to two months and, in a few states, allowing the use of electronic benefit transfer cards online. On April 17, the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture announced funding at approximately \$192.6 million to promote strategies and knowledge that can be rapidly implemented to minimize or eliminate COVID-19 impacts on the nation's food and agricultural system, with one of the goals intended to increase food security.

These shifts are significant and will affect the way food assistance

is provided into the future. At such a time, there is a rare opportunity for public, private, and academic partnerships to use an unfortunate natural experiment to examine efficiencies gained and lost in policies, systems, and environments; recommend strategies to strengthen emergency preparedness for operations across the food system; and identify sustainable approaches to ensure food security for all people at all times in all environments (see the box on this page).

COVID-19 has underscored interconnectedness of the global food system and immediate effects on food security and public health in the United States. The insights we gain now and plans we develop to mitigate food insecurity could be applied to other major global challenges, including noncommunicable disease, climate change, natural disasters, population pressure, and civil and political unrest. We collectively have a responsibility to examine the current landscape to ensure a resilient food system and a steady stream of healthy food for all that reduces socioeconomic and health inequities. Such a moment highlights the crisis of food insecurity that has existed for

centuries and provides the rare occasion to envision solutions to achieve food security. *AJPH*

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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