

David R. Just
Susan Eckert Lynch Professor of Science and Business
Cornell University

Testimony before the Joint Public Hearing: Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems

At the onset of the pandemic, temporary and permanent business closures drove a dramatic and unprecedented spike in unemployment which in turn flooded the food assistance system with newly food insecure households.[1] [2] This disproportionately affected households with children, Black and Hispanic populations, women and seniors.

In a survey of food banks conducted in June 2020,¹ all banks reported an increase in demand for food assistance, but the degree of increase was geographically concentrated, and not easy to predict a priori. Often local economic conditions were driven by supply or demand barriers in local industries, though the barriers themselves may not have been local. Average distribution of food (by weight) increased by 25%. However, this number hides the dramatic heterogeneity seen between communities. About 20% of food banks increased distribution by more than 50% (and some report increases near 100%), while up to half increased distributions only modestly. Those with steepest increases in food distribution reported dramatically longer lines. These pantries also reported difficulty procuring enough food to meet the need, and difficulty providing enough labor to distribute the food. Many of the pantries lost much of their regular (both paid and volunteer) labor because many of these are elderly and were at a particular risk. This difficulty was exacerbated by a dramatic drop in food donations from grocers who were facing stock outs. Cash donations increased, but could not provide immediate relief. Food orders were delayed several weeks as supply lines to both food banks and grocers were disrupted. At the same time, restaurants had a surplus of food they could not use, but also could not donate. Food banks could not accept restaurant donations due to food safety guidelines forbidding repackaging.

Respondents report that government relief efforts (both state and federal) were the lifeline that allowed operations to adapt after the initial disruptions. However, these programs were only able to respond as quickly as they received reliable

¹ A telephone survey of 200 food banks in the United States conducted in June 2020. A total of 111 responded to the survey covering 26 states. This survey was funded by the Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability.

information about the geographic concentration of growing needs, and the extent of the need. While the onset of the pandemic created a food security crisis that was unprecedented in scope, such crises are not uncommon at a local level when localized economic crises materialize. These circumstances often create similar localized spikes in need, though generally are not accompanied by the same logistical issues that have complicated the pandemic.

Future food security emergencies could be addressed more rapidly, more effectively and more efficiently by implementing a system to track food insecurity indicators at a local level in real time. Implementing such a system could help ensure resources are available to meet the need before it develops into a crisis. Several different approaches could help provide an early warning system that could inform state level relief efforts. These vary widely in terms of cost and effectiveness:

- The least expensive approach would use internet search data by region to monitor food insecurity related searches. Search data reacts very quickly to changes. However, it may miss some increases in food insecurity when individuals are already familiar with food assistance resources. Moreover, this data is usually not geographically precise.
- A pro-active strategy could collaborate with businesses to encourage reporting on intent to lay off workers or other actions that might create food insecurity (e.g., cutting hours, etc.). This information could be used to mobilize resources before they were needed, or even direct affected workers to assistance resources.
- Daily tracking of 211 calls or other government contacts that reveal food security status could be tabulated and used for the purpose of predictive response.
- Collaborating with food banks to obtain client numbers by day or week at the pantry level would give immediate and direct indicators of rises in hunger at a narrow geographic level. This data would not be as easy to use for predictive purposes, but would yield real time need.
- Individual or household reporting could also be used similar to the COVID Alert NY app. This would require heavily publicizing the app and perhaps connecting it to food assistance (or other) functionality to ensure the data would be and remain reliable.

Having real time data at a narrow geographic level would assist in targeting food aid and support. This may be of particular importance in areas where food

assistance is not easily accessible or limited in scope. This data could also identify when a crisis might be of sufficient weight to consider suspending some regulations locally to allow for temporarily increased donations. Many who face food insecurity do not take advantage of government or private food assistance. Often this may occur due to perceived stigma or fear due to potential legal troubles or undocumented status. Real time tracking of food insecurity could help to identify localities where there are populations that are food insecure yet are not making use of resources. Identifying these populations could prompt responses that may be more effective at addressing this latent need.

Food insecurity crises are not infrequent, and are currently difficult to predict. This generally results in a delayed response. I encourage New York state to take the lead in creating a real time food security tracking system that will allow a more immediate and dynamic response to future crises.

1. Gundersen, C., et al., *Food insecurity during COVID-19*. Applied economic perspectives and policy, 2021. **43**(1): p. 153-161.
2. Schanzenbach, D. and A. Pitts, *How much has food insecurity risen? Evidence from the Census Household Pulse Survey*. Institute for Policy Research (IPR) Rapid Research Report. Northwestern Institute for Policy Research. Published June, 2020. **10**.