

**MEMORANDUM**

**Date:** April 27, 2022

**To:** Special Rapporteur on the right to food

**From:** P. Gizem Templeton, Duke World Food Policy Center  
Alison M. Cohen, consultant with the National Right to Food Community of Practice

**Re:** Call for input - Impact of the COVID-19 on the Right to Food

Responses to the questions below are taken from a recently published analysis of a survey conducted by the [Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center](#) and [WhyHunger: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on U.S. Hunger Relief Organizations August-November 2020](#). The authors of this memo are co-authors of the study and report.

The study is a detailed and nuanced story about COVID-19's impact on food insecurity in the U.S. through the experiences of private, charitable non-profit organizations. These Hunger Relief Organizations (HROs), such as Food Banks, food pantries, and anti-hunger Advocacy Organizations, were on the front lines of food assistance, ensuring people who were in need got access to food during the most worrisome months of the pandemic. This research sampled the experiences and activities of these HROs across the U.S. from June through September 2020.

The study demonstrated that the U.S. is witnessing an emergency food system pushed to its limits, exposing the true extent of the root causes of food insecurity. The experiences and sentiments captured in this midyear 2020 study highlight and amplify existing issues around food insecurity in the U.S. The pandemic arguably creates a crossroads moment for addressing food security in the U.S. The results of this survey, when placed alongside what we all witnessed and experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, spotlight fault lines in the emergency food system and the broader food system. This crossroads also presents clear opportunities for guaranteeing the health and well-being of people residing in the U.S., including the need for grassroots-led organizing efforts to hold the U.S. accountable as duty bearers in ensuring the right to food.

**1. At what points over the past two years, and how, has the food system in your country been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? Have there been any specific sectors and locations that were more impacted?**

During 2020, the COVID-19 virus became a global pandemic causing an unprecedented crisis for the hunger relief sector in the United States. Prior to the onset of COVID-19, over 35 million people in the U.S. regularly struggled to put adequate food on the table for their families, and 4 out of 5 U.S. workers lived paycheck to paycheck (USDA ERS 2022). **In the midst of the pandemic, the number of people experiencing food**

**insecurity was estimated to be over 60 million, and unemployment tripled from 3.6% to 13.0% of the population** (Feeding America 2020). However, by the end of 2020, according to the USDA-ERS Household Food Security Report 2020, released in September 2021, the rate of food insecurity had returned to 10.5% of U.S. households (38.3 million people living in food insecurity, including 6.1 million children and 9.4 million adults living in households with very low food security). Pre-pandemic – in 2019 – marked the first time that the rate of food insecurity (10%) fell significantly below the previous low point recorded in 2007, prior to the Great Recession (USDA ERS 2021). **A national food insecurity rate that has not dipped below 10% even in more prosperous times is a reminder that hunger is consistently a pressing paradoxical social challenge in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. And the fact that it swelled to more than double that at the height of the pandemic demonstrates the precarity many U.S. households face in making ends meet.**

## **2. What were the challenges in overcoming reduced access to adequate food and nutrition and interrelated impacts on other human rights during the crisis?**

The following challenges were those experienced by U.S.-based hunger relief organizations (HROs) at the height of the pandemic:

### **Increase in demand for services**

The majority (79%) of HROs that responded to our survey reported a significant increase in demand for services and, notably, an increase in first-time clients, unemployed clients, individuals experiencing homelessness or housing issues, and individuals from outside the organization's usual service area. Further, the experience of HROs in this survey indicating that the number of first-time clients was significant is consistent with reports outside this study indicating that Food Banks and Frontline Organizations were a necessary supplement to federal safety net programs that were critical but insufficient. [Feeding America](#), which served 4.2 billion meals from March through October 2020, reported a 60% average increase in food bank users during the pandemic with 4 out of 10 being first-timers.

### **Reduction or suspension of services and programming**

HROs suspended some of their programs during the pandemic, primarily in-person programs. The rationale for the changes was keeping clients, volunteers, and staff safe from the COVID virus. Examples of suspended programs included culinary training, cooking classes, gardening programs, nutrition education classes, after-school programs, and weekend backpack programs. Non-food social service support, such as clothing donations, job training, etc., were also among programs some organizations suspended.

Since indoor dining posed a big risk for contracting and transmitting the COVID-19 virus (and in many locations was prohibited by local authorities instituting lockdown rules), HROs suspended many in-person meal service programs such as congregate meals and soup kitchens with on-site seating. This might have contributed to feelings of isolation

and loneliness among those who regularly used these services, as reported by some of the respondents.

### **Loss of Volunteers**

Overall the biggest challenge for HROs was loss of their volunteer base due to COVID risk. Over 80% of Food Banks and over 60% of Frontline and Advocacy Organizations operated with fewer volunteers compared to pre-pandemic times. Unsurprisingly, all HROs identified dependence on volunteer staff as a critical weakness in the emergency food system. The issue of whether HRO workers are paid staff or volunteers speaks to the precarity of these organizations as they respond to community needs.

### **Reduction in Provision of Fresh Foods due to Logistical and Infrastructure Challenges**

Lack of refrigerated and shelf-stable food storage, and delivery options impacted HROs ability to provide fresh foods throughout the pandemic. During the survey period, HROs struggled to handle the volume of both perishable and shelf stable food moving through their facilities. Around 60% of HROs rated a lack of refrigeration space for perishable food and space for shelf-stable food as critical limitations and barriers. In addition, over 60% of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations reported concerns about lack of transportation options to bring food to an increased number of homebound clients.

### **Poorly coordinated and insufficient government response**

HROs struggled with the lack of coordination, consistency, and predictability of the government's response to the pandemic. Forty-five percent of Advocacy Organizations and about a third of Food Banks and Frontline Organizations indicated insufficient or delayed government response as a barrier encountered during the pandemic. Similarly, they also perceived a lack of coordinated response from the government as problematic.

Through a program called the [Farmers to Families Food Box Program](#), the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchased food products from U.S.-based producers and donated them to Food Banks and other charitable organizations for distribution to households in need (USDA AMS 2021). Several written responses to our survey specifically addressed the ways in which this program missed the mark.

*Quote from Food Bank respondent: "Farmers to Families box program highlighted that government does not truly understand the food banking system; raw product from farmers/suppliers would have been preferred over costly pre-boxed foods."*

*Quote from an Advocacy Organization respondent: "There was a lack of client choice in the Farmers to Families Food Bank program."*

*Quote from a Food Bank respondent: "Why doesn't the USDA work with organizations that are providing on the ground services before creating programs designed to help. They aren't being designed well and therefore are not always helpful."*

*Quote from a Food Bank Respondent: "Support more coordination and collaboration to eliminate duplication of services and the start of new services when existing programs already fill the need but just need the support to keep going."*

**3. Which segments of the population – e.g. migrants, agriculture workers, Indigenous peoples – have been more vulnerable and constrained in accessing adequate, nutritious and healthy food throughout the different phases of the pandemic? What were their main sources of procuring food? Which new risks and vulnerabilities in food access have you observed to emerge during the pandemic?**

#### **Widening racialized gap in food insecurity**

A close examination of the [2020 Household Food Insecurity Report](#), supplemented by the [U.S. Census Bureau's real time data](#) collection throughout 2020, revealed that Black, Indigenous and Latinx households' experience of food insecurity remained the same or became worse when disaggregated and compared to white households.

Hispanic households experienced roughly double the rates of food insecurity compared to white households — something that was also true before the pandemic. The experience of Black households when compared to white households demonstrates a widening gap as a result of the pandemic.

Black households now experience roughly triple the rate of food insecurity compared to white households – this was not true before the pandemic (Feeding America). Many news stories and reports from Indigenous or tribal organizations revealed the depth of food insecurity experienced by Native peoples in the U.S. during the pandemic. However, federal data collection efforts that inform the response to food insecurity, do not delineate Native American populations, rather collectively categorizing into one group all Asians, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. Information collected from non-governmental sources generally places the rate of Native American food insecurity (1 in 4) above the national average and double that of white households. A [2019 study](#) co-designed and conducted by UC Berkeley and four Native American tribes living within the Klamath River region (spanning parts of California and Oregon) showed that 92% of Native American households in the study suffered from food insecurity.

Households' experience with food insecurity during the pandemic continues to underscore the tenacity of racial inequities. A [recent analysis](#) by Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research, of data gathered by the Census Bureau tracking food insecurity in real time during the pandemic in 2020 found that around 29% of Black households with children and 24% of Latino households, compared to 14% of white households, reported not having enough to eat "sometimes or often" over the course of the pandemic in 2020. And even as the pandemic began to slow its spread in late 2020 and the food insecurity rate began to fall back to pre-pandemic levels, the rates for Black households fell more slowly.

**A quote from a Frontline Organization survey respondent:** " We have been seeing more immigrants who in [the] past had several low wage jobs supporting the household. Now

*most have lost their jobs and are concerned about the negative effects of applying for common financial supports that others in [the] community access – Like SNAP and unemployment.”*

**4. What beneficial or counter-productive measures have been deployed nationally and locally (laws, policies, fiscal measures, or social security/social safety nets) in the aftermath of the pandemic? What impact have they had on ensuring access to adequate food and nutrition? What was the role of workers, small-scale food producers, and the agri-food industry in the development and implementation of these measures?**

#### **Increase in private charitable and state-sponsored funding**

Across the board, HRO respondents saw substantial increases in funding as individual donors, government agencies, foundations and corporations sought to help address the escalating need for emergency food assistance. The increase in funding reported by the respondents is consistent with the general trend of a rapid and steep growth in charitable giving as a result of the pandemic. A [report](#) by the Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP) and Candid published in August 2020 found that during the first half of 2020, the \$11.9 billion given in response to the COVID-19 pandemic far exceeded philanthropic contributions for previous disasters. The report, *Philanthropy and COVID-19 in the First Half of 2020*, reveals that foundations and individual donors stepped up to meet immediate needs and services arising from the pandemic.

#### **Federal Farmers to Families Food Box Program**

The Farmers to Families Food Box Program, administered by the US Department of Agriculture, was a program designed to solve two co-existing crises: a spike in food insecurity due to COVID-19 and supply chain disruption issues. The \$3 billion program was heavily criticized in the beginning for awarding contracts to companies that had no track record in procuring food from farmers or distributing food to those in need. An [evaluation](#) conducted by the Food Law and Policy Clinic and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) praised the intentions of the unique program but pointed out ways in which the program did not equitably reach the intended beneficiaries -- small to mid-sized farmers, and especially BIPOC- and women-owned farms. In addition, the evaluation found that food distribution to families in need was undignified in many cases and also inequitable across the nation for many food insecure populations.

#### **Families First Coronavirus Response Act**

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) was signed into law March 18, 2020, as the second major legislative initiative designed to address [COVID-19](#). The

FFCRA, effective April 1 through Dec. 31, 2020, provided expanded nutrition assistance, paid sick leave, enhanced unemployment insurance coverage, free coronavirus testing, and increased federal Medicaid funding. Phase 2 of Expanded food assistance included almost a billion dollars for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC). The bill also allocated \$400 million for emergency food assistance, help for those with children eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches whose school is closed, and emergency [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) benefits, including a temporary suspension of the SNAP three-month time limit on funding adults under age 50 with no children.

Phase 3 provided \$450 million for [the Emergency Food Assistance Program](#), to supply food banks and provide operational assistance. An additional \$200 million went to food assistance for Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories, plus \$100 million for food distribution at American Indian reservations. Nearly \$16 billion was added to SNAP, and another \$8.8 billion was made available to Child Nutrition Programs.

Families participating in SNAP saw average assistance increase by roughly three-quarters since the start of the pandemic, thanks to a combination of emergency supplementary benefits and a 15%, across-the-board boost due to expire in September. The new permanent benefit increase went into effect in October 2021.

Under a new program called [Pandemic EBT](#), more than 8.4 million families also received extra aid to cover the meals their children would usually eat in school cafeterias. The Biden administration upped those payments in January 2021, from \$5.86 per child per day to almost \$7. That program will remain available for the duration of the public health emergency, extending into summer 2022.

##### **5. What kind of food price variations, trade restrictions, and supply chain disruptions have had the most impact on main foodstuffs, nationally and locally?**

72% of HROs identified unpredictable food supply chains and increased reliance on shelf-stable items as opposed to fresh foods as weaknesses in responding to emergencies. 65% of HROs cited lack of government support and solutions to address the root causes of hunger as problematic. More than 75% of HROs see inequitable access to healthy, fresh food as a food system weakness and more than 59% see an overabundance of processed foods as a problem. More than 62% of HROs see the cost of food as a significant problem, as well as the precarity of food supply chains (more than 66%).

##### **6. What longer-term measures, if any, have been considered, nationally and locally, to address harmful impacts of the continued pandemic, as well as of future shocks? What lessons could be drawn from the pandemic about how to make your food systems more equitable, resilient and sustainable? In which way should the food system of your country be reformed in order to ensure better access to adequate food to everyone?**

### **Permanently Strengthen the Social Safety Net**

Throughout the responses to many open-ended questions, HROs advocated for local, statewide or federal officials to do more in order to strengthen the social safety net. HROs advocate for local, statewide or federal officials to increase funding for Pandemic-EBT, TEFAP, unemployment, and to implement universal free school meals across the nation. In their responses to the survey, HROs advocated for increased support for programs that intersect with issues of food security such as mental health, childcare and virtual school programs. HROs also advocated for SNAP changes such as more flexibility, broader access, fewer eligibility requirements, and a simpler application.

The contribution of Food Banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and other hunger relief organizations makes up a relatively small percentage of the overall charitable response to hunger in the United States. SNAP, under the auspices of the USDA, delivers roughly nine times more food to people than the 200 Food Banks who make up the entire Feeding America network (Feeding America 2019).

The importance of the federal nutrition programs to support families who are facing food hardship is critical, and many HROs are cognizant of the private charitable food system's limitations in ending food insecurity. Feeding America is a strong advocate for strengthening SNAP as a primary means of supporting hungry families and encourages its network of 200 Food Banks to advocate on the state-level: "SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger in our communities. SNAP benefits give families more dignity when meeting their food needs and help shorten the lines of families waiting for food assistance at Food Banks." (Feeding America). And, according to [Food Bank News](#): "SNAP outreach emerged as the most common [advocacy activity] by far, available at 73 of the largest 100 Food Banks." And, yet, [SNAP](#) which is designed "to provide nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency" in no way eradicates the underlying reasons for food insecurity: persistent poverty due to insufficient income (i.e., a federal minimum wage that has not kept pace with inflation).

The United States Census Bureau reported that during the pandemic more than three-quarters of families relying on nutritional assistance (i.e. SNAP) had at least one person working and about one-third included two or more workers. Employment in the U.S. does not guarantee self-sufficiency (US Census Bureau 2020). Chronically low wages means workers cannot cover the basic costs of living. Food is one of a handful of non-fixed expenses that families can – and often do – reduce compared to other items such as medication, childcare or housing.

The United States' social safety net -- comprising a variety of programs designed to protect low income people from poverty and hardship -- includes programs such as Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Medicare and SNAP. However, some argue the programs are troubled with inadequacies and inequities, particularly with regards to race. In addition, a [recent analysis from the Center for American Progress](#) revealed state-level differences in how benefits are distributed. In particular, the analysis showed that U.S. regions with larger populations of color have weaker safety nets and anti-

poverty policies, and that regions with weaker safety nets have higher rates of hardship and worse economic outcomes overall.

The average level of benefits in the six programs that provide cash or near-cash assistance varies substantially across programs and states. None of these programs provide adequate benefits because levels of assistance are set substantially below the [poverty threshold](#). And, while the social safety net has successfully enabled low-income families to survive, **it has on the whole been insufficient in helping families escape poverty altogether**. As Political journalist Adam Millsap wrote in an [article](#) published by Forbes in 2021: “The goal of a safety net should be to reduce the number of people who need it at any given time, not out of callousness, but because a life spent receiving public assistance is not the life most people want. Whether as an employee or employer, a lifetime of creating value for others and participating in a society based on mutual benefit and voluntary exchange is more fulfilling than a lifetime spent getting by on public aid.”.

The pandemic was particularly instructive about the insufficiency of the U.S. social safety net in normal times but especially during times of unanticipated catastrophes that affected people in all regions of the U.S. – not just the chronically poor and food insecure. Some of the weaknesses revealed that resulted in additional strain to HROs as they filled in the gaps included: delays and administrative strains in unemployment insurance, the slow pace of adjustments to the amount of SNAP dollars available, and certain states did not expand Medicaid. The general conclusion is that, in order to be better prepared for future unexpected emergencies that lead to sudden economic crises, the U.S. government should enact policies that would automatically increase the levels of aid provided through the social safety net at the onset of such an emergency situation.

There are multiple ways HROs propose improving the social safety net in the US:

- Increase funding permanently for: Pandemic-EBT, TEFAP, Unemployment benefits, Universal free meals in schools
- Extend the CFAP Program, provide flexibilities to the existing programs, and lower eligibility requirements for the existing programs
- Increase availability of support services, such as for mental health, childcare and virtual school.
- Implement the following in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): increase SNAP funding, create more flexibility and broader access to SNAP benefits, lessen eligibility requirements, waive SNAP interview requirements, and remove barriers from online applications.

*Quote from a Frontline Organization Respondent: “People need living incomes, ones that make it possible to provide both food and shelter. During times of crisis, people need additional income support. Emergency food networks should not be used to prop up an inadequate system of income support. Public benefits like TANF and disability programs are woefully under-funded and leave their participants with no options during a crisis. There also needs to be a way to assist people who are ineligible for programs due to their immigration status or other statuses which disqualify them for assistance.”*



*Quote from a Frontline Organization Respondent: “There should be a nimble way to get income support to all people who need it during a crisis and that support should be sustained throughout the duration of the crisis.”*

HROs perceive precarity of food supply chains, food accessibility and affordability as major issues, and call for a strengthening of local and regional food systems as a solution. They also called for nation-wide policy changes to support small-scale agriculture and local food systems as an emerging solution to the precarity of existing food supply chains. HROs themselves plan to make programmatic changes to support local and small-scale food systems. The majority of HROs in the study pointed to the fact that the current food system struggles to provide healthy and affordable food to consumers in a predictable manner. The number one food system weakness selected by the HROs was inequitable access to fresh, healthy food. Over 60% of HROs also perceived overabundance of processed foods leading to diet-related diseases to be a weakness. Food affordability was another issue perceived as a weakness in the food system by 62-75% of HROs.

### **Address Racial Inequities in Food Security**

Households’ experience with food insecurity during the pandemic continues to underscore the tenacity of racial inequities. A recent analysis by Northwestern University’s Institute for Policy Research of data gathered by the Census Bureau tracking food insecurity in real time during the pandemic in 2020 found that around 29% of Black households with children and 24% of Latino households, compared to 14% of white households, reported not having enough to eat “sometimes or often” over the course of the pandemic in 2020. And even as the pandemic began to slow its spread in late 2020 and the food insecurity rate began to fall back to pre-pandemic levels, the rates for Black households fell more slowly.

### **Address Food Insecurity at its Roots**

We also asked HROs what changes should be made at the local and/or national policy level that may lead to a more resilient food system. One in three respondents brought up several desired policy changes that we categorized as **root-cause related**, which was the highest number among the response categories, followed by improving direct food access programs (30%) and support for local food systems and small-scale agriculture (29%).

Listed below are the policy change recommendations that emerged out of the study that would create a more resilient food system in the future. At the heart of these recommendations is a recognition that hunger and food insecurity are not standalone issues and need to be addressed through intersectional strategies:

- Living wages/raising minimum wage
- Universal basic income
- Affordable housing
- Protections/hazard pay for low-wage essential workers
- Better benefits for essential workers, farmworkers
- Improved working conditions of essential workers

- Less emphasis on emergency food response, more on root causes of food insecurity

This survey also demonstrated that some HROs have already dipped a toe into understanding and addressing the root causes of hunger. And many have been influenced by their experiences during the pandemic to engage more deeply in root cause work. An emerging network of HROs that came together to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote ending hunger by addressing the root causes, Closing the Hunger Gap (described in greater detail in the Introduction of the survey analysis) organizes and convenes at the flexion of this tension between feeding the line and ending the line. In 2022 CTHG will be launching a narrative change campaign called Next Shift. The intended audience for the first phase of this campaign is HROs. The campaign is asking HROs to engage with the question: To what extent and in what ways do HROs “normalize” food insecurity in our society and even perpetuate it. The goal of the campaign is to enlist HROs to first commit to providing thriving wages and safe working conditions for their own staff and volunteers, and center racial equity in their own organizational structures. Ultimately the goal is to enlist HROs to challenge and change the dominant and false narrative that hunger will always be with us and instead assert that nutritious food is a human right.

**7. What multilateral support and resources are needed to transform food systems in terms of enhanced sustainability, equity and resilience in your country? What actions could be taken or should be avoided at the regional or global levels to strengthen and coordinate multilateral policy to address the COVID-19’s impact on food security?**

*Quote from a Frontline Organization respondent: “The local and state systems can implement many changes, especially ones that support small and medium size producers, all farm and food workers, etc. I prefer to focus on the big problem - our form of capitalism and the racism, sexism, and classism that upholds the food system as it is. If we don’t actively work to change our economic system, we will only piecemeal change parts of the food system and benefit a few at a time.”*

The U.S. does not affirm the United Nation’s right to food as codified in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), The U.S. has the ability to shift course and develop a legal framework for the right to nutritious food. If there’s anything we’ve learned from the COVID-19 crisis, it’s that governments, as we’ve witnessed at the state and city level, can mobilize quickly and with less bureaucracy to do the right thing. It is not only possible, but necessary to provide essential workers all along the food chain - from the fields to the processing plants to the supermarkets to the restaurants - a living wage, safe working conditions and access to health care. These are the issues and conditions at the heart of persistent poverty and food insecurity for all working families. HROs’ experience navigating the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with the insight and the impetus to reshape our society built on the foundation of equity, resilience and sustainability.

**8. Which initiatives have been autonomously implemented by small-scale food producers, food workers, women, youth, Indigenous peoples, and social groups? What support has been provided to these initiatives, and which of them do you consider having a longer-term positive impact?**

HROs call for nation-wide policy changes to support small-scale agriculture and local food systems as an emerging solution to the precarity of existing food supply chains. HROs plan to make programmatic changes to support local and small-scale food systems.

75% of Food Banks, 69% of Advocacy Organizations, and 53% of Frontline Organizations recognize structural racism as a weakness of the food system. HROs intend to address racial inequities by providing equitable food access to their clients, making internal policy and programmatic changes through a racial equity lens, and advocating for broader policy changes to rectify racial inequities in society.

*Quote from Frontline Organization Respondent: "This work is ongoing, but we are now buying food from BIPOC farmers and processors."*