

# Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic by Food Banks in the United States

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## Introduction

Since their establishment in the early 1970s, food banks and food pantries have become a fixture of welfare policy in the United States. 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 give the poor limited access to public sources of assistance—trends found in other developed democracies, but especially prevalent in the United States. Food banks have developed within increasingly sophisticated networks of public and private agencies—the federal government, food manufacturers, local and state public welfare agencies, NGOs, churches, private philanthropic foundations, corporations, and regional associations—that distribute food and other necessities to people facing food insecurity.

The onset and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 affected food banks and their operations. Early academic research,<sup>1</sup> as well as research from food banks themselves, points to 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, resulting in a reduction in 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.

This article investigates how networks related to food banks were affected by

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1. Annamarie Farmer, “A Growing Crisis with Food Banks,” *Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities* 3, no. 24 (2020): 64–70; Anne T. Byrne and David R. Just, “Impacts of COVID-19 on Food Banks,” *Choices* 37, no. 1 (2022): 1–7.

the pandemic and how food banks and their partners changed supply and delivery operations. In both cases the author is concerned as to whether these effects were temporary or long-term. The primary research question seeks structural changes in these networks that might have been caused by the pandemic, and the second question seeks tactical innovations at the final delivery stage.

## I: Literature Review

A robust academic literature on food banks and their evolution exists. Prendergast<sup>2</sup> examines the economics of market mechanisms for food distribution through food banks. Another line of research traces the development of the food bank movement from addressing issues of the disposal of food surplus to community development based on food justice and food sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> A third line of research traces the development of food banks in developed countries in the context of the neoliberal restructuring of social welfare policies toward corporate and nonprofit charities.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> These research approaches, however, focus on the operation of food bank-related networks in normal times.

The author identified four studies that examined food banks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two used indirect means to measure the pandemic's impact: Byrne and Just (2022) 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.<sup>6</sup> Lee, Zhang, and Nagya (2021) tracked donations to food banks during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Farmer (2020) provided an initial

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2. Candice Prendergast, "How Food Banks Use Markets to Feed the Poor," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 4 (2017): 145–62.

3. Alison Hope Alkon and Teresa Marie Mares, "Food Sovereignty in US Food Movements: Radical Visions and Neoliberal Constraints," *Agriculture and Human Values* 29 (2012): 347–59; Dominic Vitiello, Jeane Ann Grisso, K. Leah Whiteside, and Rebecca Fischman, "From Community Food Surplus to Food Justice: Food Banks and Local Agriculture in the United States," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32 (2015): 419–30.

4. Ugo Gentilini, "Banking on Food: The State of Food Banks in High-income Countries," working paper no. 8, 2013, Center for Social Protection; Graham Riches, *Food Bank Nations: Poverty, Corporate Charity and the Right to Food* (New York; London: Routledge, 2018).

5. For example, Joshua David Lohnes, "The Food Bank Fix: Hunger, Capitalism and Humanitarian Reason," PhD dissertation, West Virginia University, 2019; Zsafia Mendley-Zambo, Dennis Raphael, and Alan Taman, "Take the Money and Run: How Food Banks Became Complicit with Walmart Canada's Hunger Producing Employment Policies," *Critical Public Health* (2021): 1–12. Doi: 10.1080/09581596.2021.1955828.

6. Byrne and Just, "Impacts of Covid-19 on Food Banks."

7. Sunyoung Lee, Yu Yvette Zhang, and Rodolfo Nagya, "Donation to Food Banks Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiment on Impulsive vs. Deliberative Nudges." Paper presented

descriptive account of problems food banks face but did not analyze possible long-term effects.<sup>8</sup> Immel et al. (2021) examined Seattle area food banks' use of web and social media technology to communicate information about food availability and accessibility in the early phase of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

## II: Methodology

None of the research cited above, however, addresses the central theme taken up here: the durability of nonprofit organizational networks during times of acute social and economic upheaval. The research presented here combines 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 from mid-August to mid-September, 2022. All three states experienced high levels of infection and concurrent economic distress. The California sites represent regions with different economic and demographic characteristics within the state.

In order to survey a range of organizations, interviews and site observations were conducted at the Greater Lansing Food Bank in Bath, Michigan; the Three Square food bank in Las Vegas, Nevada; the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank in Los Angeles, California; the Food Share food bank in Oxnard, California; the Napa Community Action Agency in Napa, California; the Mother Lode Food Project in Sonora, California; Sierra Senior Providers in Sonora, California; and the Jamestown Christian Fellowship in Jamestown, California. These sites represent large-scale operations (Lansing, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles), medium-sized operations (Oxnard), and small-scale operations (Napa). The interviews in Sonora offer perspectives from food bank partner organizations.

Weir and Schirmer 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 tend to have a “civic-public” character while the latter are based on a mix of religious and private service provision.<sup>10</sup> 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

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at the 2021 Agriculture and Applied Economics Association Annual Meeting, August 1–3, 2021.

8. Farmer, “A Growing Crisis.”

9. Audrey Immel, Yona Sipos, Amber Khan, and Nicole Errett, “Getting the Food Out: A Content Analysis of Seattle Food Banks During the Initial Phase of Covid-19.” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (2021) vol. 10, no. 4: 267–282.

10. Margaret Weir and Jessica Schirmer, “America’s Two Worlds of Welfare: Subnational Institutions and Social Assistance in Metropolitan America,” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2018): 380–99.

banks in rural areas, and the latter face a variety of logistical obstacles to their operations.<sup>11</sup> The distribution of areas is hypothesized as important for the composition of food bank networks. A sample of organizations in western and midwestern states and in urban and rural settings will allow us to test these conclusions.

### III: Food Banks as Intermediary Institutions

Food banks are not stand-alone agencies. In principle, they do not distribute food directly to clients, although 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. They do not exclusively rely on food drives to obtain needed foodstuffs for distribution, but rather they receive supplies from a variety of external institutions. They therefore act as central clearinghouses for complex networks of food-providing and food-consuming institutions. These networks are composed of "upstream" suppliers and "downstream" consumers.

Suppliers vary depending on the food bank, but the agencies and actors shown in Table 1 are representative. Supply sources include 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 a 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.

Volunteers make up an important set of supply-side actors. While all food banks surveyed include professional full-time staff to manage operations, volunteers are a significant source of manpower for floor operations. Three Square reported that in 2019 volunteer manpower was equivalent to seventy-three full-time employees;<sup>12</sup> in 2020, 3,374 volunteers provided Food Share with work equivalent to that of thirty-eight full-time staff.<sup>13</sup> Volunteers were present at two sites visited during the research. Volunteers from a regional bank were sorting donated items while the author was being given a tour of the Greater Lansing facility; retired volunteers had just finished a similar task when the author visited the Food Share facility.

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11. Andrew Youn, Michael Ollinger, and Linda Scott Kantor, "Characteristics of Mid-Atlantic Food Banks and Food Rescue Organizations," *Food Review* 22, no. 1 (1999): 45–51.

12. Interview with Brian Burton, President and Chief Executive Officer, Three Square, Las Vegas, Nevada, August 12, 2022.

13. Food Share Ventura County, "Annual Impact Report, Fiscal Year 2020–2021," (Food Share Ventura County, 2021): 11.

Table 1: Food Bank Supply Stream

Suppliers		Consumers
USDA	Food banks	Food pantries
Feeding America		Churches
State food bank associations		Shelters
Individual donors		Nonprofits
Corporate donors		Schools
Restaurants		Elderly care services
Supermarkets		Other
Community gardens		
Producers		

Source: Author compilation

Finally, there are private financial donors. These include area corporations and individuals. The most prominent among these is Feeding America, the national umbrella organization with a membership of some two hundred food banks. Feeding America makes grants for facilities improvement and food purchase. Other large-scale grant providers include state food bank councils and philanthropic organizations.

Food banks distribute to many consumers, including 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. It should be noted that food banks apply means testing, including income assessment, when determining whether individuals are qualified to avail themselves of food bank supplies. Food banks and affiliated pantries are understood to be supplemental to regular consumption rather than a substitute for it.

The author identified two types of food bank organizations during the research. One type is the independent food bank, typically chartered as a nonprofit organization. In Michigan, seven food banks covering different regions of the state are members of the Food Bank Council of Michigan. Each food bank is responsible for multiple counties in its region. The Greater Lansing Food Bank covers the seven counties around the state capital, Lansing (Clare, Clinton, Eaton, Gratiot, Ingham, Isabella, and Shiawassee counties).<sup>14</sup> The Food Bank of Eastern

14. Greater Lansing Food Bank, "About GLFB," <https://greaterlansingfoodbank.org/about-glfb>.

Michigan covers twenty-two counties.<sup>15</sup> A second type of organization, the community action agency, is found alongside independent food banks in California. Community action agencies are typically combinations of public-private partnership that were mandated by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act.<sup>16</sup> As such, they are public agencies rather than private nonprofits. They act not only as food banks but are also responsible for other social services within their communities. While food banks are prominent in that state, community action agencies operate as food banks in the less populated (and often poorer) parts of the state, particularly in counties of Northern California, the Central Valley, and the foothill and mountain counties of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.<sup>17</sup> California food banks typically serve a particular county: Food Share, for example, serves Ventura County on the Central Coast. Community action agencies, on the other hand, tend to serve two or more counties. The Amador Tuolumne Community Action Agency, for example, serves both foothill counties; its website also mentions that clients from neighboring counties avail themselves of its services.

#### **IV: Issues 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, this section discusses the challenges they faced in terms of suppliers, consumers, and internal organizational issues. Unless otherwise noted the following is taken from the interviews conducted during fieldwork.

##### **1. Suppliers**

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. The Food Share respondent stated that individual donations during the pandemic were “nonexistent” and food drives could not be conducted.<sup>18</sup> This was especially acute 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,

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15. Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, <http://www.fbem.org/>.

16. ATCAA, “Who We Are,” <https://www.atcaa.org/history>.

17. See California Department of Social Services, “Food Banks,” <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/food-banks>.

18. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, Chief Development Officer, Food Share Ventura County, Oxnard, California. August 19, 2022.

individuals made fewer donations as they faced their own shortages resulting from lockdowns or loss of employment. Lockdown and social distance constraints also 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. Three Square reported donations of food from area casinos and restaurants just before they closed for the first lockdown in Nevada.<sup>19</sup> The respondents at Greater Lansing reported being “inundated” with food from restaurants trying to clear their stock, leading to a short-term peak, but which was offset by a drop in supplies from store chains.<sup>20</sup> This may have been the case in other areas, but such donations were singular events, however, rather than continuous.

Delays in distribution, sometimes by weeks or months, occurred at a number of locations as supply chains were interrupted.<sup>21</sup> Supply issues varied by location, however. As noted above, Three Square was able to avail itself of surplus food from casinos and restaurants immediately before lockdown. It experienced significant delays in receipt of fresh produce, however, because it depends on supplies from California. The director noted that before the pandemic his staff could order produce with a one-week lead time; during the early months of the pandemic the time lag stretched to up to two months.<sup>22</sup> Access to fresh produce was less of an issue elsewhere: respondents at the Greater Lansing Food Bank and Food Share noted that they had access to produce from community gardens. Food Share’s warehouse facility, in fact, is adjacent to the county-sponsored community garden. In the Ventura County case, moreover, the respondent observed that the bigger issue for local growers was how to dispose of produce that could not be delivered due to disruptions in distribution.<sup>23</sup>

One unexpected issue arose at several food banks. 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. The Greater Lansing Food Bank actually distributed more meals in 2022 than in 2020 (9,173,560 versus

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19. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

20. Interview with Michael Steibel, Marketing and Communication Manager, and Kirsten Breau, Individual and Foundation Giving Specialist, Greater Lansing Food Bank, Bath, Michigan, August 26, 2022.

21. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12; interview with Elizabeth Cervantes, Director of Agency Relations and Product Acquisitions, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, Los Angeles, California (online), August 17, 2022; interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19, 2022.

22. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

23. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19; interview with Michael Steibel, August 26, 2022.



8,074,000).<sup>24</sup> As one respondent put it, the end of the pandemic did not signal the end of hunger in the region served by the bank, even though donors often reached that conclusion.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Consumer Issues

The most prominent issue food banks faced during the pandemic was significantly increased demand for food from clients who had lost their 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, food pantries and other partners faced lockdown orders just like other institutions. A common problem faced by the food banks investigated was the closure of food pantries, which limited the ability to distribute food to clients. Food Share reported a reduction of 25 percent of its food pantry partners.<sup>26</sup> Three Square reported that its network of 180 agency partners (food pantries, etc.) was reduced to ten during the initial lockdown in early 2020.<sup>27</sup> Distribution to school programs was also affected when schools temporarily closed or moved to online teaching. In a twist to this problem, the pastor of a church/food pantry noted that the community action agency with which his operation is registered temporarily closed due to state lockdown orders in 2020.<sup>28</sup>

Four main internal organizational issues emerged from the interviews. The first was the reduction of volunteer labor due to lockdown and social distance considerations. One respondent noted that many of her bank's volunteers are senior citizens,<sup>29</sup> a demographic especially vulnerable to early strains of the virus. 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. The CEO of the Las Vegas food bank noted that this created a potential division among the staff between "carpet and concrete," in other words administrative staff working remotely versus warehouse staff who had to remain on-site to receive and

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24. Greater Lansing Food Bank, "A Year of Hope: 2020 Impact Report," 44; Greater Lansing Food Bank, "About GLFB," <https://greaterlansingfoodbank.org/about-glfb>.

25. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19, 2022.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

28. Interview with Robert P. Rice, pastor, Jamestown Christian Fellowship, Jamestown, California, September 5, 2022.

29. Interview with Elizabeth Cervantes, August 16, 2022.



distribute foodstuffs, and suggested that the decision to put administrative staff on remote work affected social dynamics within the organization.<sup>30</sup> In the smaller food banks, for example Napa and Oxnard, administrative staff continued to work on-site throughout.<sup>31</sup> As noted above, the pastor of a church operating a food pantry noted that the local community action agency upon which his pantry was largely reliant temporarily closed in the early stages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, he decided to suspend church services for three months while continuing to operate the food pantry.<sup>32</sup> Finally, social distancing requirements posed challenges for operations supplying food directly through Meals on Wheels to shut-ins and the elderly or to policies such as that at Food Share that allow food pantry volunteers to select bakery items directly at the warehouse.

## V: Responses

### 1. Supplier Responses

In addition to regular USDA food provision, the agency enacted the Coronavirus Federal Assistance Program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program to help alleviate increased demand faced by food banks. Three Square specifically noted that without such federal aid “Three Square would not have been able to serve the thousands of Southern Nevadans seeking food assistance.”<sup>33</sup> California growers found themselves faced with crop surpluses as demand from stores and schools declined during lockdowns. In response, Food Share partnered with growers and the Port of Hueneme to ship local agricultural surplus to other food banks in the state. In return, it received credit from the California Association of Food Banks to receive items it needed from other food banks. The respondent commented that “(W)e are getting pretty good at handling produce. We can get it out on a dime.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition to grants, state governments also helped alleviate the gap in volunteer labor by dispatching the National Guard to food banks. The Greater Lansing Food Bank, Food Share, and the Community Action Agency of Napa reported receiving such manpower during the pandemic.<sup>35</sup>

Increased food provision by USDA did not cover food need completely. Food banks increased direct purchase of food items as private food donations

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30. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

31. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19; interview with Drene Johnson, Executive Director, Community Action of Napa Valley, Napa, California, September 1, 2022.

32. Interview with Robert Rice, September 5, 2022.

33. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

34. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19, 2022.

35. Food Share Ventura County, 11; Greater Lansing Food Bank, “A Year of Hope,” 4; interview with Drene Johnson, September 1, 2022.

diminished, 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. As of 2022 she estimated that direct purchase accounted for about 40 percent of total food acquisition.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, reductions in volunteer numbers resulted in reallocation of staff to tasks previously assigned to volunteers. Respondents noted that in 2020 full-time staff had to undertake tasks such as food sorting and packing.<sup>37</sup> Paid staff positions also increased. In the case of Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, staff increased from 135 in 2019 to 147 in 2020, 167 in 2021, and to 184 in 2022.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, theft emerged as a problem related to increased demand. The pastor of the Jamestown church/food pantry noted that he had to install a security camera at his facility to deter thieves.<sup>39</sup> The respondent in Napa stated that her facility faced the problem of “food bank hopping” in which out-of-area people would use drive-through operations (see below) to collect food that they would then sell. Her agency had adopted online registration, which more efficiently tracks client eligibility, as a remedy to the problem.<sup>40</sup>

## 2. Responses to Consumer Problems

As noted above, demand for food increased during the pandemic. Los Angeles Regional Food Bank reported delivering 81,807,593 pounds of food in 2019, 174,680,137 in 2020, and 131,086,763 in 2021. As of July 2022 the bank had distributed 64,404,074 pounds.<sup>41</sup> Note that 2022 mid-year data suggest that even in that year food delivery for the Los Angeles operation was likely to be higher at year end than it had been in 2019. Food Share distributed 25,660,496 pounds of food in 2020, of which 9,660,329 pounds (38 percent) was classified as “COVID-19 response.”<sup>42</sup> These numbers are indicative of the situations other banks faced during the pandemic.

At the same time, food pantries closed, putting food banks in the unaccustomed

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36. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19, 2022.

37. Interview with Michael Steibel and Kirsten Breau, August 26; interview with Drene Johnson, September 1, 2022.

38. Communication with Elizabeth Cervantes, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, August 20, 2022.

39. Interview with Robert Rice, August 5, 2022.

40. Interview with Drene Johnson, September 1, 2022.

41. Communication with Elizabeth Cervantes, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, August 20, 2022.

42. Food Share Ventura County, “Annual Impact Report,” 12.

position of having to distribute food directly.<sup>43</sup> In addition, food banks faced the necessity of maintaining social distance while doing so. In some cases, banks innovated while maintaining their intermediary roles. One respondent noted that other food banks have partnered with Amazon and DoorDash (a private food delivery service). Her bank had not done so because it was thought that it would be difficult to break relationships with these companies once the emergency was over.<sup>44</sup> School lunch programs and Meals on Wheels service continued. In the latter case, delivery personnel adopted delivery styles used by Amazon and other private delivery services, dropping off food boxes at doorsteps without directly meeting clients.<sup>45</sup> During the pandemic, agencies adopted online registration to link clients to food banks or delivery services, a move away from traditional “walk-in” food pantry services. Students using the University of California Los Angeles food pantry, for example, could download an application that allowed them to make pickup appointments remotely.

A widespread innovation to meet the problem of providing direct service was the introduction of drive-through food distribution when access to parking lots or other large spaces was available. All of the food banks researched here adopted this policy, and it appears to have been a nationwide response. Clients could drive up to a distribution point and remain in their vehicles while food bank staff or volunteers placed groceries in the vehicle’s 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. Three Square was able to use parking lots provided by area casinos. The respondent noted that in peak periods traffic lines extended up to four miles (about 6.5 kilometers), but efficient distribution operations kept lines moving.<sup>46</sup> Several interviewees noted a positive side effect of this kind of operation: drive-through seemed to lessen the sense of stigma for using a food bank felt by clients who were using them for the first time. As one noted, drive-through pickup meant a client did not have to leave the car, helping the person retain a sense of privacy and dignity.<sup>47</sup> While many of these operations have been terminated since the end of the emergency period, some food banks continue reduced drive-through operations to supplement their other distribution efforts.

## Conclusion

Referring to the diversity in his industry, the director of the Three Square Food

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43. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

44. Interview with Jennifer Caldwell, August 19, 2022.

45. Interview with Thomas Beck, Sierra Senior Providers Meals on Wheels Volunteer, Sonora, California, August 5, 2022; conversation with a food bank volunteer, August 2, 2023.

46. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

47. Ibid.

Bank quipped that “if you’ve seen one food bank, you’ve seen one food bank.”<sup>48</sup> Food banks covered here range from large-scale metropolitan organizations to local agencies in less-populated areas covering three states. Yet in many respects the problems they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic were the same, and the repertoire of their responses were, in the main, uniform. No doubt this is due to the nationwide impact of the pandemic and the fact that it presented common challenges to social services agencies—changes in manpower composition, social distancing, and increased unemployment leading to heightened demand for services. Individual food banks innovated depending on local circumstances, but the responses described above represent a repertoire of policies that can be found among the banks researched in all three states. This suggests that Weir and Schirmer’s conclusions about regional differences among food banks and other social services agencies may be less relevant in the face of a disruption of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another reason for a common repertoire of responses may stem from the fact that COVID-19 is not the first time that food banks have dealt with disruption. When asked about this, the Napa respondent chuckled and commented that her agency was constantly dealing with some disruption or another. She pointed specifically to large-scale wildfires in Central California in 2014 that had displaced large numbers of residents in her area.<sup>49</sup> Thus, while the pandemic presented unique problems of social distancing, for example, it was not unique in being an emergency that required food bank responses.

The ability of food banks to respond to the pandemic is no doubt due to the strength of the networks in which they are embedded. Official agencies provided timely support, as can be seen in the augmentation of USDA supply programs or the substitution of National Guard personnel for volunteers during lockdowns. Drive-through programs require space for vehicles. Offers of area casino parking lots for Three Square to use attest to the bank’s embeddedness in the community, as do multiple responses concerning restaurant offers of surplus food on the eve of lockdown (tax incentives to donate were no doubt also a factor here).

Three Square officially ended its COVID-19 emergency response on July 26, 2022.<sup>50</sup> As conditions returned to normal, emergency programs by many food banks were suspended or curtailed. For example, drive-through distribution was replaced by pre-pandemic walk-in service as food pantries reopened, and the National Guard was replaced by returning volunteers. The pandemic, however, appears to have changed certain food bank policies or at least accelerated them. A notable example is the move to online registration of clients, which has efficiencies in terms of data gathering and circulation that go beyond social

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48. *Ibid.*

49. Interview with Drene Johnson, September 1, 2022.

50. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

distancing issues. A second is the move away from individual food donations and food drives. The Greater Lansing Food Bank respondents noted that the bank is phasing out food drives;<sup>51</sup> the Mother Lode Food Project, which supports the Amador Tuolumne County Community Action Agency's food bank activity, now encourages cash donations instead of in-kind contributions.<sup>52</sup> Food drives and individual donations are labor-intensive ways of gathering food that require sorting and packing typically done by volunteers. Such donations also lack uniformity, and food banks can buy food in bulk much more cheaply and in greater volume through direct purchase. In terms of cost, therefore, this change makes sense. Conversely, such donations are staples of community involvement with food banks that link religious and civic organizations to them.

Finally, the pandemic may have benefited food banks themselves. Increased demand for food led to the need for an enhanced response, which then led to greater institutional capacity and the infrastructure to go with it. The Greater Lansing Food Bank completed its new and expanded warehouse facility in Bath Township, Michigan, in 2021. The warehouse includes five bays for simultaneous delivery and loading of large-size trucks and separate refrigeration systems for produce and dairy products.<sup>53</sup> Three Square completed a new program for delivery to elderly clients in September 2020, six months after the onset of the emergency.<sup>54</sup> While plans for these had been initiated before the onset of the pandemic, the ability to complete them in the midst of a health crisis requiring short-term responses to highly fluid circumstances speaks to that institutional capacity.

Respondents also noted that the leveling impact of Covid raised awareness about food banks and opened a debate about the causes of food insecurity. Preliminary research about public support for related welfare policies stemming from the Covid experience<sup>55</sup> suggest that positive experiences with food bank use might lead to public support for broader public social welfare. This point deserves attention and further research.

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51. Interview with Michael Steibel and Kirsten Breau, August 26, 2022.

52. Interview with Ellen Beck, co-founder, Mother Lode Food Project, Sonora, California, August 5, 2022.

53. Interview with Michael Steibel and Kirsten Breau, August 26, 2022.

54. Interview with Brian Burton, August 12, 2022.

55. David Crabtree and Wesley Wehde, "Examining Policy Feedbacks from Covid-19 on Social Welfare Support: Developing an Outcome Distance Dimension," *Policy and Politics* 51, no. 4 (2023): 156-79.