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Food Insecurity in DuPage County

During the Pandemic



Introduction

Purpose of Study

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis like none other in recent history. Its impacts are many and varied. Coronavirus is not just wreaking havoc on our medical systems, but also our economy. The acute stress on our economy has forced once stable households to the brink of collapse. Many of these households would be in much more dire straits if not for the human service agencies and their funders stepping up to help provide basic necessities. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in our local food distribution networks.

Data from several sources show a dramatic increase in the number of households struggling to put enough food on the table. Some 18 million adults — 9 percent of all adults in the country — reported that their household sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat in the last seven days, according to Household Pulse Survey data collected March 17-29. This was above the pre-pandemic rate: a survey released by the Agriculture Department found that 3.4 percent of adults reported that their household had “not enough to eat” at some point over the full 12 months of 2019. When asked why, 76 percent said they “couldn't afford to buy more food,” rather than (or in addition to) non-financial factors such as lack of transportation or safety concerns due to the pandemic.¹

Additionally, a study conducted by Feeding America stated the number of food insecure residents of the United States increased from 35.2 million to 45 million (+27.8%).² This study was designed to determine if similar increases occurred in DuPage County, and, if so, were there DuPage County communities harder hit by this increase than others.

To get a better understanding of COVID's impact on food insecurity in DuPage County, DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform (DuPage Federation) conducted a study to answer the following questions: 1) Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted food insecurity in DuPage County? 2) Are there any communities in DuPage County that have been disproportionately impacted by an increase in food insecurity caused by COVID-19?

Methodology

Overview of Design

This study relies on survey methodology as well as key interviews. The survey was designed to capture past and current utilization numbers of local food pantries. Participants answered additional questions around food procurement difficulties, volunteer recruitment, and other day-to-day operations that might have been impacted by COVID-19. Key informant interviews were used for a more in-depth exploration of survey findings.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

² https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_0.pdf

Survey Methodology

The survey was designed to probe into how food assistance programs are addressing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked about increasing needs, program delivery transitions, emergency funding requests, etc. This data should help create a snapshot of the food assistance sector during the pandemic.

The survey was distributed to over fifty organizations that provide food assistance to DuPage clients. We tapped into existing food assistance networks to send out the survey. This helped ensure that 25 organizations responded. Respondents were geographically diverse, but all respondents served at least a portion of DuPage County.

Respondents were also diverse in size. Some respondents served hundreds of people per year, while other organizations served tens-of-thousands per year. The diversity of size captured by this survey demonstrates that scale of operation was not an insulating factor from the consequences of the pandemic. Large and small food pantries underwent similar transformations to address pandemic needs.

Lastly, this survey captured a range of diversity in the type of food pantries that participated. Faith-based nonprofit, secular nonprofit, and government-run food pantries all responded to the survey. The type of food pantry had no bearing on how the food pantry responded to the pandemic.

Key Informant Interview Methodology

While the survey findings give breadth to this study, it is the key informant interviews that give it its depth. DuPage Federation selected a variety of survey respondents to interview about their survey responses. These follow-up interviews were especially useful to help understand survey responses at a more fundamental level.

DuPage Federation followed-up with the following survey respondents via interview:

- HCS Family Services
- Loaves and Fishes
- Neighborhood Food Pantry
- Northern Illinois Food Bank
- People's Resources Center
- Wayne Township
- York Township

These organizations were selected to provide a diversity in geographic service area, size, type, and survey response. This ensures that the study had a depth of analysis from a diverse range of respondents.

Findings

Increase in Food Assistance Needs

Numbers Served CY 2019 Versus CY 2020

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of clients served in Calendar Year (CY) 2019 and CY 2020. The pandemic started in earnest in March 2020 for our locality. We therefore compared CY 2019

to CY 2020 to estimate a baseline of the increase in food assistance needs related to the pandemic.

When we asked for this information, we did not specify “duplicated” or “unduplicated,” and our review of the survey data alongside what agencies reported publicly, demonstrated that there were likely some of each type reported.

Here is what we found:

- 75% of pantries reporting data regarding number of persons served (15 of 20) saw increased numbers served.
- The range for increases in numbers served was very broad, with 20% (3 of 15 reporting increases) reporting more than doubling growth in number of clients served.
- The takeaway is that, across the county, more people were served, and many of those served received help more frequently.

While our survey sample is great for capturing the diversity of food pantries that operate in DuPage County, outliers can easily impact results when there are twenty-five respondents.

An additional complication is that different communities saw an increase in new families needing services, while others saw only an increase in meals. Areas such as Willowbrook have seen an increase in the number of new families needing assistance. According to a key informant, “we were serving about 30-40 [families] pre-covid [in Willowbrook]. And then at the top of the [pandemic] curve we were serving just under 160 families per week.”

However, other key informants stressed that in their areas they were not seeing a large increase in new clients, but rather they were seeing an increase in the number of meals and the quantity of food pre-pandemic clients needed. These key informants suggested this is likely due to the pandemic pushing already financially stressed households deeper into financial difficulties.

Whether communities saw an increase in new clients, an increase of need for pre-pandemic clients, or a combination of these two factors, only four respondents out of twenty-five stated that they had not seen an increase in need. This demonstrates that needs have increased in DuPage County.

There is another strong indicator of increased need, coming from a key informant that provides food for many food pantries in DuPage County, and stated, “the increase in meals...averaged about a 18% to 20% increase during COVID in DuPage County.” This is yet one more helpful indicator, that is number of meals served, that helps illuminate the growth in need.

[DuPage County Communities Hit Hardest by Food Insecurity](#)

We asked survey respondents to list the communities in DuPage County they serve. We used this information in conjunction with the reported number of clients served to determine if there were any communities in DuPage County that were harder hit by the increase in food insecurity related to the pandemic. This analysis did not show a significant difference between any reported communities.

However, key informants were able to pinpoint communities that were hardest hit by an increase in food insecurity during the pandemic. As one key informant whose organization served all of DuPage County stated:

“We recognized pretty early on Bensenville, Addison, North Elmhurst, the area around the airport...Carol Stream, Glendale Heights [were] very high need areas [with] a high immigrant population and very much impacted by...unemployment...Also, West Chicago...and the Willowbrook [and] Bolingbrook areas.”

This aligns with other key informants that identified communities such as Willowbrook and West Chicago.

Struggling to Serve Current Demand

Only four of the twenty-five respondents indicated that they are struggling to meet current food assistance needs (16%). There was no obvious geographic connection between the respondents that said they were struggling to meet demands.

None of the key informants stated that their organizations were struggling to meet demand. Key informants attributed their ability to meet current demands on an increase in funding, an increase in community support, and the ability to adjust to the pandemic efficiently and effectively.

Product Shortages

Ten respondents indicated that there were product shortages (44%). Some common products that are in short supply include:

Identified Product Shortage	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Dairy Products	6	60%
Fruit & Vegetables	5	50%
Hygiene Products	4	40%
Meat Products	3	30%
Culturally Appropriate Products	3	30%

According to key informants, product shortages were more severe at the beginning of the pandemic. As more and more individuals began to panic buy items such as canned fruits and vegetables at retailers, local food pantries struggled to source enough food. However, local food pantries were able to handle this initial lack of food thanks to assistance from Northern Illinois Food Bank (NIFB), community support, and federal aid. As one key informant explained:

“Most of the food that we offer used to come from rescued food or a partnership with retailers. That partnership was greatly impacted during COVID initially, so we didn’t have the same amount of food coming in. We were able to rely [on] and find support through the food bank or the federal supplies that came out.”

If it were not for these partnerships and emergency aid, it is likely that many DuPage County residents would have gone hungry—especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

Changes in Food Assistance Services Due to the Pandemic

Change in Food Assistance Delivery Models

All but one respondent indicated that they had changed food assistance delivery due to the pandemic (96%). Some of the most common changes to these delivery models include:

Identified Service Changes	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Change from Market Shopping to Pre-Packaged Drive-Thru Model	17	71%
Less Staff & Volunteers Due to Social Distancing Moving Larger Quantities of Food	5	21%
Closing Non-Food Assistance Programs Due to Pandemic Limitations	3	13%

According to key informants, these changes were made swiftly and efficiently. The changes were necessary to protect staff, volunteers, and clients. However, these changes were not without downsides. As one key informant stated, “the most significant change for us is a change to curbside service...that was a choice over safety and precaution rather than a more personal touch.”

Key informants were eager to share that, while changes to services were necessary, the lack of client choice and personal connection between organizations and their clients continue to be difficult side-effects. People are not necessarily getting the food the types of food they need because they cannot select food. Additionally, because the pandemic service model limits contact, organizations are not always able to determine if clients need help with other issues. Therefore, important referrals to other services are not happening at the same rate they used to.

Currently, organizations are working to find ways to reduce the consequences of service delivery change. For instance, some organizations are utilizing technology to allow clients to select food via the internet. Other organizations are offering a variety of pre-packaged food boxes that clients can choose from to give clients a little more choice.

Barriers

The majority of respondents reported client barriers to accessing food assistance (56%). Some of the most common barriers include:

Identified Barriers	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Transportation	13	60%
Language	7	28%
Incompatible hours of operation with community needs (<i>example: food pantry is only open during traditional work hours</i>)	4	16%
Lack of Cultural Food Staples	3	12%

In addition to these pre-existing barriers, several respondents (7) indicated that there were new or worsening barriers related to the pandemic. Some of these include:

- A worsening of the transportation issue
- Lack of staff due to social distancing
- The need for better community outreach and communication

As with any other type of program, there have always been barriers for DuPage County residents seeking food assistance. The most prominent of these pre-existing barriers is transportation. One key informant explained this barrier as, “anytime you’re going to be transporting a lot of food, it’s really tricky for people to try and figure out how to do that if they don’t have a car.” Pre-pandemic people asked for rides with neighbors, navigated difficult public transportation schedules, hired cabs, or made other arrangements to get from their homes to the food pantry and back again with boxes of food.

However, during the pandemic the issue of transportation has only worsened. As one key informant stated, “transportation barriers got worse. We know families had troubles getting cabs—especially the older community. Cabs didn’t want to pick them up if they were sick at all. They were less able to get transportation.” In addition to issues with cabs or other hired forms of transportation, concerns about the pandemic spreading on public transit or carpooling have made transportation an even greater barrier.

Emergency Pandemic Funding

All but two respondents indicated that they had received additional pandemic funding (92%). A breakout of emergency funding sources is as follows:

Identified Emergency Pandemic Funding Sources	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Individual Donations	17	68%
County Government	13	52%
Foundation/Private Grants	12	48%
Federal Government	6	24%
State Government	4	16%
Local Government	4	16%

It is likely that without these sources of emergency pandemic funding that the food assistance sector would not have been able to transition services as effectively and efficiently as they did. It is even possible that many DuPage County residents would have gone hungry without this assistance. Organizations opened their geographic borders and eased some restrictions to serve more hungry people at a time when food was even harder to procure than normal. Doing so put these organizations under enormous financial strain and continuing to serve DuPage County residents in a such a way could have had severe financial ramifications.

However, funders stepped up to fill the financial holes. This funding, as one key informant explained, “allowed us to do the work that we needed to do without the fear of going under as an organization.” Thanks to these funders, organizations were able to focus on serving DuPage County residents instead of worrying about how they were going to afford to do so.

These organizations take the trust funders have put in them very seriously. The outpouring of emergency funding has been so great that many organizations in the food assistance sector are looking at how best to use these funds during the recovery phase of the pandemic and beyond. There is a desire from this sector to be good stewards of the funding entrusted to them. One key described how their organization is already looking ahead by asking, “what do we need to do with this money that we have that came in from the community during this pandemic to make sure that we’re good stewards of it, and we’re using it appropriately to support the community.”

What Organizations Need to Continue Serving Communities

We asked respondents to list the top three things they needed to continue serving their communities. The following are the top five:

Identified Product Shortage	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Continued Funding	14 (56%)	56%
More Volunteers	8 (32%)	32%
More Food	8 (32%)	32%
More Equipment	7 (28%)	28%
Technology	5 (20%)	20%

There was some concern among key informants that funding may dry up once the pandemic begins to dissipate. Organizations in the food assistance sector worry that needs will either remain similar to current levels or even potentially increase as the pandemic comes to a close.

Currently government assistance to families in the form of increased SNAP allotments, unemployment benefits, and other similar programs are helping families that are unemployed or underemployed due to the economic consequences of the pandemic purchase food. However, this increased government support is currently scheduled to end later this year and will be removed from these families—potentially before they can get back on their feet. This could lead to a surge in need just as the public’s interest in the consequences of the pandemic begin to wane.

The other needs are related to the need for continued funding. The need for more volunteers, food, equipment, and technology is due to the increased the need that a lot of organizations are seeing as well as the concern that these needs may not be met in the future. Organizations are starting to prepare for the end of the pandemic and what that means for their needs, and these are the things they most need to continue their services.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings from this study was just how much organizations in the food assistance sector agreed. Organizations appeared to go through similar processes, reach similar conclusions, and take similar action. This speaks to the connectivity and collaboration inherent in this sector. It also speaks to the commitment from community members, community funders, and government agencies to ensure that our neighbors do not go hungry.

There was a theme throughout all the survey responses and key informant interviews of stepping up in the face of catastrophe. Ordinary community members opened their wallets and their calendars to support their local food pantries through donations of money, food, and time. Community funders gave financial lifelines to food assistance organizations that not only kept their services afloat but also provided these organizations the opportunity to improve their capacity to serve clients for many years to come. Government assistance was timely and well-communicated, which helped food assistance organizations secure the tools they needed to survive the pandemic.

The need for food assistance in DuPage County has increased due to the pandemic. However, thanks to the efforts of the organizations in the food assistance sector and their partnerships with organizations such as Northern Illinois Food Bank, DuPage County Department of Community Services, DuPage Foundation, Community Memorial Foundation, local businesses, local community service chapters, and many others, these organizations were able to address the needs of their communities quickly and effectively.

However, the work is not done. There were barriers to food assistance pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. It is unlikely that there will not be barriers after the pandemic as well. The partnerships that were strengthened in the pandemic could go a long way towards addressing barriers such as transportation, language, etc. These partnerships must be sustained through the remainder of the pandemic as well as through the recovery process if the good work during the pandemic is to be sustained.

Study Limitations

This study was designed to give a snapshot of how the food assistance sector addressed the changing needs of their communities brought on by the pandemic. It was not designed to encapsulate the whole system, nor was it designed to study the longitudinal impacts of the pandemic on the food assistance sector. Further study is needed if readers are interested in following how food assistance organizations will respond as the pandemic continues as well as examining how food assistance organizations will address community needs during recovery.

Additionally, the survey question designed to determine if there was a significant increase in food assistance need between CY2019 and CY2020 was more ambiguous than intended. There are a few variables that food assistance organizations look at to determine need, and the survey question only asked about one of these variables. Future surveys will add question to illuminate the other variables.

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More generally, we would like to thank the food assistance sector for the good and timely work to keep our neighbors fed during these unprecedented times. Similarly, we would like to thank all those that provided emergency funding, so that organizations could meet the needs of their communities during the uncertain times of the pandemic.