



HUNGRY FOR ACTION

Building Food System Resiliency amid COVID-19

REPORT SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of the food system: all the activities, resources, and relationships that go into producing, distributing, and consuming food. Images of emptying grocery shelves filled the news as the pandemic began, and many people experienced food insecurity for the first time. However, many of the health and economic disparities illuminated by the pandemic are systemic public health issues that were already critical pre-pandemic. During the initial stages of COVID-19 response, nonprofits, private industry, and policymakers needed to protect the supply chain, support the restaurant industry's changing landscape, and address food access during isolation, among other challenges.

In 2019, 13.6 percent of households with children experienced food insecurity,¹ yet with the historic employment upheaval brought on by COVID-19, rates of people experiencing food insecurity has grown.²

The Milken Institute Center for Public Health's [COVID-19 Food Response and Policy Inventory](#) (the Inventory) provides a consolidated view into how actors across the food system responded to the initial challenges to nourish communities while taking part in new social distancing practices.

In May 2020, more than one in five parents living with children under age 19 reported that their households experienced food insecurity during the past month.³

1. USDA Economic Research Service, Food Security and Nutrition Assistance, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance>.

2. Elaine Waxman, Poonam Gupta, and Michael Karpman, "More than One in Six Adults Were Food Insecure Two Months into the COVID-19 Recession" (Urban Institute, July 20, 2020), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/more-one-six-adults-were-food-insecure-two-months-covid-19-recession>.

3. Ibid.

Using the Inventory's data, our new report, "Hungry for Action: Building Food System Resiliency amid COVID-19," is intended to set the stage for further impact analysis. The Inventory tracked 223 retailers, restaurants, "other industry" (i.e., manufacturers and distributors), and nonprofit organizations' responses and 69 policies from March 20 to July 15, 2020, and was compiled from publicly available information.

COVID-19 FOOD RESPONSE TRENDS

- Retailers, restaurants, and other industry stakeholders most successfully relied on actively partnering with or donating resources to those within the existing nonprofit ecosystem.
- Private organizations launched new partnerships that extended beyond passive donations.
- Nonprofit organizations remained the foundation of agile, quick-acting responses to deliver food in innovative ways to people most in need.
- Businesses prioritized protecting their workforce, with 58 percent expanding employee benefits, including enhanced pay or leave.

Our analysis of trends in the Inventory and follow-up interviews with food systems stakeholders make one key finding clear: Innovative partnerships are critical to a resilient food system. This report identifies successful, scalable partnership trends and ways for food system stakeholders to create and nurture impactful partnerships.

Existing public-private partnerships were integral to our emergency food system pre-pandemic, and the expansion of this infrastructure was crucial in the initial pandemic response.⁴ Initial federal COVID-19 relief passed in March and April 2020 allocated over \$400 billion for existing and new food systems programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Enhancing these and other strategic partnerships rooted in community need can create a more cohesive, resilient approach instead of stopgap solutions or one-time donations.

Resilient food systems can prevent disasters and crises as well as anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from them in a timely, efficient, and sustainable manner.⁵

4. "FNS Nutrition Programs," USDA, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs>.

5. "Building Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition," Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations Regional Office for Near East and North Africa, accessed October 5, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/neareast/perspectives/building-resilience/en/>.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING A RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEM

The learnings from the Inventory underscore how the power of partnerships—both new and established—benefited the response effort. We recommend that food system stakeholders looking to craft impactful partnerships consider the following recommendations for a more nourishing, sustainable, and equitable food future:

Build innovative cross-sector partnerships for both immediate impact and long-term resiliency.

- What are the goals of each partner in this joint effort?
- What strengths does each partner bring to the relationship, and how can these be leveraged for a more significant impact?
- Are there other cross-sector stakeholders or viewpoints that could enhance this work?

Put people, especially the most vulnerable, at the center of partnership efforts.

- How are you incorporating community voices when building out partnerships or solutions?
- What assumptions are you making about the community with whom you are working?
- What metrics are you using to understand need when building partnerships?

Make structural commitments and support long-term solutions to bolster existing infrastructure.

- When considering partnerships, what role do you see yourself playing, and what kinds of support do you intend to provide?
- Have you dedicated resources specifically for building and maintaining impactful partnerships?
- How do you measure the impact of response efforts in the long term?

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