

PREPARING FOR FOOD SYSTEM RESILIENCY IN OHIO

POLICY AND PLANNING LESSONS FROM COVID-19

COVID-19 highlighted notable systemic weaknesses across the food system in Ohio and the U.S. at large. These impacts emphasize the need to better understand the roles of and relationships between public sector stakeholders and partners in the food system to effectively plan for and respond to future emergencies.

The Ohio State University (OSU) and the Ohio Emergency Management Agency (Ohio EMA) partnered to explore how Ohio agencies and organizations responded to the pandemic and to map the policy environment around food and agriculture in Ohio. Research included reviewing Ohio emergency response plans related to food and agriculture, interviewing stakeholders, documenting important policies, and mapping administrative responsibility for these policies. The following summary describes the impact the pandemic had on Ohio's food system, characteristics of the policy environment that hindered effective response, and recommended policy changes to better address future emergencies, disasters, and disruptions.

Food System Impacts

Supply chains were slow to adapt to consumer demand transitions from institutional to in-home use. Food suppliers and distributors often had trouble adapting to immediate shifts in purchasing as people purchased more goods for at-home use. Transportation bottlenecks further complicated the process of shifting markets, contributing to shortages at the point of purchase. Additionally, some Ohio producers were unable to get their products to market or donation, resulting in wasted product and lost agricultural income even as food insecurity rose.

Inadequate protections for essential workers threatened supply chain stability. To maintain critical supply chains, food system workers (e.g. farm workers, grocery store workers, etc.) were classified as “essential” and continued to work during stay-at-home orders. These workers were often at significant risk of infection and some facilities were forced to shut down due to outbreaks leading to further disruptions in the supply lines.¹ Infection exposure also placed significant risk on the shoulders of this working population, which is disproportionately made up of people from minority and low-income communities.²

The pandemic decreased the ability of Ohioans to purchase food. Layoffs and work restrictions—particularly in the service sector—immediately reduced the income of many Ohioans. While expanded unemployment assistance helped ameliorate these effects, lost income forced many Ohioans to resort to the emergency food system. Food insecurity was further exacerbated by price volatility resulting from supply chain disruptions.³ Price spikes for food staples decreased the overall purchasing power of consumers, including those receiving food assistance.

Barriers to Pandemic Response

Emergency preparedness plans approach disasters as relatively isolated, short-term problems. Federal, state, and local emergency management agencies have historically conceptualized disasters as highly localized events, with a focus on emergency feeding. Associated planning and exercise scenarios have assumed that food assistance could be shipped in from adjacent regions and that emergency

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supplies of less than a week would be sufficient for households to weather disasters. Contrary to these assumptions, COVID-19 disrupted supply chains at every level from production to consumption across all supply chains throughout the United States for extended periods, upending these assumptions.

Administrative capacity and lack of coordination hindered short-term policy responses to the pandemic.⁴ The administrative environment around food and emergency assistance complicated effective responses. Food and agriculture program management involves dozens of public and private organizations, often with little formal communication and reporting relationships between them. Siloed programmatic responsibility complicated the ability of state agencies to coordinate services.

Federal-state division of authority for emergency food programs complicated effective coordination. In many cases, authority for program initiation and implementation began at the federal level. Division of responsibility for food assistance between federal and state-level administrators created an additional layer of administrative complexity and added a further hurdle for state-level managers that hindered pandemic responses.

Ohio state agencies historically not considered central to food systems became pivotal. The systemic impacts of COVID-19 on the food system highlighted the importance of agencies that are historically not involved directly in food or agriculture. Most notable were transportation, which impacted shipping, and social service agencies that were impacted by increased social needs often triggered by household-level food insecurity.

Recommended Next Steps

Invest in a diversified food system. Greater support for farm operations selling through a variety of markets will be key to developing the supply chain resiliency in the face of similar emergencies. Shorter agricultural supply chains (e.g., direct sales to consumers) were better positioned to adapt to changing market conditions compared to producers selling into commodity markets.⁵ Ensuring the viability and robustness of short food supply lines will require investments both in the small and mid-sized agricultural operations that sell through them and critical infrastructure such as food processing that can service these markets.

Develop coordinated emergency preparedness plans to streamline response to systemic crises. Administratively, COVID-19 highlighted the need for system-level emergency response planning. Responding to future emergencies will necessitate emergency response planning and training scenarios that consider these systemic, extended time-horizon impacts over large geographic areas.

Strengthen inter-agency and inter-organizational connectivity and communication. Effective response to future emergencies requires strengthening connectivity and coordination among state-level agencies and organizations to improve coordination and system-wide awareness among program administrators. Convening relevant stakeholders, including those indirectly associated with food and agriculture, and implementing management strategies that encourage communication beyond the bounds of conventional administrator silos will be key.

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To download the full report, visit <https://u.osu.edu/ccwl/projects/ohio-emergency-management-and-food-systems/>

Endnotes

1. Tina Saitone, K Aleks Schaefer, and Daniel P Scheitrum, "Covid-19 Morbidity and Mortality in Us Meatpacking Counties," Food Policy (2021); 2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Risk of Exposure to Covid-19: Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/increased-risk-exposure.html>; 3. Dave Mead et al., "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Food Price Indexes and Data Collection," in Monthly Labor Review (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020); 4. Randy Alison Aussenberg, "USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021); 5. Dawn Thilmany et al., "Local Food Supply Chain Dynamics and Resilience During Covid-19," Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy 43, no. 1 (2021).