

Food Sharing in the US: What's Changed During COVID-19?

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I worked with SHARECITY, a food sharing organisation started by Professor Anna Davies, to examine some of the impacts of the Novel Coronavirus on community gardening, community kitchens, and surplus food redistribution.

Due to the need for a rapid review, I carried out a keyword search only on Google News which is a news aggregator app developed by Google. This would not pick up all the articles on the pandemic's impact on food sharing and will likely under-represent insights from food sharing initiatives themselves who might document their activities on blogs and through other social media networks. However, it gives a good insight into media analyses. **I found that, despite the global pandemic's far-reaching negative impacts on nearly every aspect of our society, we are experiencing some unexpected opportunities for growth in these key areas.**

What's Happening in Community Gardens?

After being closed as a precautionary measure in many states at the outset of the pandemic, April and May 2020 saw many community gardens reopen as local officials recognised their importance in community life. My research found that the number of growers in shared garden spaces is surging during the pandemic.

The 23 points of data I evaluated for the key term 'community gardens' originated from 19 different US states. Growers are adapting to the new social distancing measures and community gardens are proving to be a vital source of food and social connection. As people spend more time close to their homes due to "Shelter in Place" and "Stay Home" orders, it makes sense that the local, low-cost nature of community gardening is appealing. Community gardens enable people to undertake gentle exercise and interact with plants and soils as well.

Under the surface, however, is a more serious issue. According to a study published by Feeding America, a hunger relief organisation, COVID-19 is expected to increase the number of food-insecure individuals in the US by as much as 17 million (Feeding America 2020). In 2018, 37 million Americans were already food-insecure. As unemployment skyrockets and the poverty rate follows suit, community gardens are part of the grassroots responses to meet urgent needs. Many of the reports I came across mentioned community gardens donating produce to community members in need, directly or through community kitchens. New initiatives are encouraging people to "not just grow [produce] for themselves, but to grow for others" (Pennsylvania Horticultural Society 2020).



Steven Pisano, 2020.

What's Happening in Community Kitchens?

Community kitchens create opportunities for people to come together over food. For this key term, 14 different states produced the 22 reports I evaluated. Compared to community gardens, which in many cases can access state funding or use state-owned land, community kitchens seem to have always functioned relatively independent of the government, and this is no different during the pandemic. The valuable opportunities that these organisations are providing (to eat together with others or, under COVID-19 restrictions, delivering food to those who would normally avail of the community dinners) would likely benefit from a more centralised system with increased state support. Community kitchens that were operating long before COVID-19 are experiencing a surge in demand, accommodating long-time service users as well as the millions of Americans who are experiencing food insecurity for the first time. In Santa Barbara, California, a soup kitchen has been serving nutritious soups to low-income residents and seniors with serious illnesses. To protect their clients' health during the pandemic, the kitchen is operated by a closed circle of volunteers, with some cooks working fifteen hour shifts (DeVine 2020). Commercial restaurants across the country are also undergoing a transformation into temporary community kitchens. In New York, award-winning chef and restaurateur Marcus Samuelsson has converted his restaurants into community kitchens through partnerships with food rescue non-profits. On the self-reflection that prompted him to make this choice, he says: "I always go back to what I know: Feed the people" (Samuelsson 2020). Through his multiple kitchens, he serves over 12,000 people every day (The Economist 2020). This kind of business adaptation is keeping restaurant staff and farmers in work, feeding food-insecure communities, and reducing food waste. Many articles praised the provisional system for its community-centred goals. However, this is only a short-term emergency response. According to a report commissioned by the Independent Restaurant Coalition, 85% of independent restaurants, which comprise 70% of all restaurants, are expected to go out of business by the end of the year in 2020 (Independent Restaurant Coalition 2020).



John Rohrer, 2020.

Brendan Mackie, 2020.



What's happening in Surplus Food Redistribution?

The redistribution of surplus food, often called food rescue in the USA, is used as a means to reduce edible food waste. The 17 cases I analysed came from only 7 different states. Similar to community kitchens, food rescue is largely being carried out by non-profit groups. While pre-COVID-19, the main focus of surplus food redistribution was to redirect surplus at the retail or consumer phase of the food system to reduce waste, the pandemic has made visible the fragility of the food system with food distribution networks under pressure. In some cases, farmers are destroying their crops and livestock because they can't sell them as per usual (Kaufman 2020). At the same time, the number of people facing hunger under the current COVID-19 climate is rising at an alarming rate. Billions of dollars in funding from the US government is being focused towards food rescue (Haynes 2020).

However, critics find the process disorganised with resources not reaching the organisations and communities that need them. In response, many grassroots organisations new and old are working overtime to ensure vital food supplies reach the people who need them most. While there are some positive developments in surplus food redistribution, such as the creation of new food rescue organisations, there is still work to be done. These efforts expose deep, pre-existing problems in the US food system.

Final Thoughts

Community kitchens and surplus food redistribution initiatives rallied to serve a growing proportion of communities in dire need of food and will continue to do so for as long as they can and for as long as a need exists.

The fragility of the entire economic system, including the food system, has been revealed by COVID-19. Will this stimulate greater political will to address the root causes of the food system's un-sustainability?

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