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Food Crisis as a Tool for Social Change: Lessons from New York City’s COVID-19 Response

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted food availability and affordability and changed the daily food practices of New Yorkers in three critical ways: (1) closing restaurants and public institutions, including schools, reduced food access and changed shopping patterns, food expenditures, and diets; (2) economic disruption exacerbated food insecurity and increased the need for food assistance; and (3) altered food practices affected diets. Vulnerable populations were disproportionately affected by these disruptions to the food system. The city’s response included emergency measures to stave off food insecurity and hunger, yet the crisis also prompted a refocusing of food governance to address other social equity issues in the food system: fears of engaging with food programs by immigrant communities; disparities in access to online grocers; worker rights and worker ownership; and new priorities for the use of public space. The paper presents policy responses to the pandemic that illustrate how the crisis has opened opportunities for initiating changes that can lead to a more just food system.

1.1. Introduction

Throughout history, the global food system has experienced periods of overproduction, poor harvests, distribution breakdowns, and other disruptions, sometimes significant enough to foment social unrest and political change (Clapp and Moseley, 2020; Barrett, 2020). Climate change-induced stresses, natural resource depletion, and widening economic inequality have, in recent decades, increased the precariousness of local food systems and have made food crises in cities the “new normal,” requiring municipal governments to respond with food plans and policies (Lang, 2010; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010; Hamilton et al., 2020; Heslin, 2020; Crush, 2013).

In the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both global and local food systems (Laborde et al., 2020). Outbreaks at slaughterhouses slowed meat processing, leading to shortages and price spikes that revealed vulnerabilities in food supply chains (Garcés, 2020). COVID-19 control measures exposed preexisting social inequities and stratifications and the lack of coherent policies to control the virus or address its economic fallout (Kinsey et al., 2020). Responses to the pandemic such as school closures and business restrictions have disproportionately burdened low-income Black, Latinx, and immigrant populations, forcing many vulnerable households to cut back on necessities, including food, leading to sharp increases in hunger and food insecurity.

Although food policy remains a low priority for many local governments (Raja, 2020), cities are also sources of policy innovation, places where struggles for community power, control of public space, consumer-based activism, and civic engagement lead to novel policies and programs (Santo and Moragues-Faus, 2019; Cohen and Ilieva, 2020). Progressive cities have begun to approach food from a perspective that includes the kinds of social, environmental, and economic concerns that the pandemic has made politically salient (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015; Sonnino, 2019). Like previous food crises that have created opportunities for social change (Kolodinsky et al., 2020), the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated food insecurity and racial and ethnic disparities, has opened opportunities to address root causes in addition to symptoms.

2.1. Material and Methods

This paper discusses the case of New York City, where a food crisis

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resulting from the pandemic has led to emergency responses that contain within them the seeds of social change. It analyzes a set of policy initiatives to address those impacts that attempt to avert hunger and malnourishment and seek to advance equity in the food system. Data on New York City’s policy responses to COVID-19 came from an analysis of policy documents and a review of secondary sources addressing food access, food insecurity, and food labor compiled since March 2020. The author was also part of a collaborative study of the city’s response to COVID-19 that comprised researchers from the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy at Teachers College, and the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center that published its initial findings in September 2020 (New York Food 20/20, 2020).

3.1. Policy Responses to the Pandemic

The pandemic, early policies to curb the spread of COVID-19 (see Table 1), and the resulting economic fallout made it more difficult for New Yorkers to obtain food and increased food insecurity and hunger. These negative effects were more severe among Black and Latinx and lower income people than White and more affluent residents. Grocery shopping patterns changed in response to restaurant closures and efforts by individuals to stay at home, significantly increasing the amount of food purchased for home preparation and the percentage of meals prepared and eaten at home.

Given the magnitude of the problems facing New York City, city officials launched a large-scale effort to stem food insecurity and malnourishment. On March 21, 2020, the City augmented its office of food policy with a “Food Czar Team” headed by the city’s Department of Sanitation Commissioner, an experienced manager of complex municipal operations. Within three weeks of its launch, the team released a strategy, called Feeding New York, to respond to the food crisis caused by the pandemic, including: supporting food pantries and soup kitchens financially, replacing food that had been served by closed schools with emergency meals, and providing food deliveries to homebound New Yorkers (City of New York Department of Sanitation, 2020). The goal was to prevent hunger and malnourishment among the most vulnerable populations.

The city’s responses also were influenced by the cumulative effect of more than a decade of food activism in New York City by food security organizations, urban farmers and gardeners, social justice advocates, Black Lives Matter protesters, labor unions, progressive public officials, and others demanding that the city act more decisively to address deep seated inequities. The emphasis of activist organizations on equity in the food system led the New York City Council in 2019 to release a policy platform, Growing Food Equity in New York City: A City Council Agenda which reflected this turn to food equity. The City Council’s food agenda frames food policy in the context of persistent food system injustices, including disparities in the food system that affect the well-being of New Yorkers (Cohen and Ilieva, 2020).

3.1.1. “Anonymous” Grab-and-Go Food

When schools closed, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented policy responses to replace the meals served by school districts, including approving a waiver allowing schools to distribute meals directly to parents, outside of mealtimes, in non-congregate settings. New York City quickly established emergency “grab-and-go” meal pickup locations at 439 sites after the school system’s more than 1,300 buildings closed in March 2020. At the emergency locations, parents were able to pick-up three meals per child, per day, five days a week.

To ensure that immigrant communities were able to avail themselves of the emergency meals, the city had to address fears by many parents of disclosing their personal information to government agencies and participating in programs that might jeopardize citizenship status that has inhibited participation in other food assistance programs (Vignola et al., 2018). In New York City, an estimated 504,000 people lack documentation and approximately 1 million live in mixed-status households in which a member of the household is undocumented (NYC MOIA, 2019).

The city ensured that undocumented individuals and members of their households could pick up meals for their children from the grab-and-go program with no questions asked about eligibility (McLoughlin et al., 2020). The Department of Education’s notification to parents emphasized that no registration, identification, or documentation was required to pick up these meals, that no one would be turned away, that adults and children could pick up three meals at one time, and that parents or guardians could pick up meals for their children. Because the city had never required identification or even proof of children in school, the meals had been effectively available to all people in need, regardless of household composition or documentation status.

3.1.2. Pandemic EBT For All Schoolchildren and Families

The federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act created a Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program that allowed states to provide funds to households with schoolchildren that qualified for free or reduced-price school meals to make up the economic value of the school meals that the households lost because of the schools being closed and their children being unable to eat school food. In New York City, P-EBT benefits were provided to all households with schoolchildren because of a previous successful advocacy campaign organized by the coalition Lunch 4 Learning that successfully pressured New York City in 2017 to expand universal free lunch to the entire school system (Freudenberg et al., 2018). A central aim of making school lunch free for all students was to eliminate the stigma associated with qualifying for free lunch when other students are required to pay, but during the pandemic an added benefit was the distribution of P-EBT funds, worth $420 per child in 2020, to every household with children in New York City schools. P-EBT has been particularly valuable to low-income immigrant households that are ineligible for other food benefit programs due to their status (Bellafante, 2020).

The universal payments raised concerns about the fairness of allocating them to all parents regardless of need, and the possibility that stigma might inhibit higher-income households from using public benefits. In response, city officials, advocacy organizations, and individual

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### Table 1

| Date | Event |
|------|-------|
| March 7 | Governor declares a disaster emergency in New York State. (State of New York, 2020a) |
| March 16 | Governor bans gatherings of more than 50 people and restricts restaurants to take-out. (State of New York, 2020b) Mayor closes all 1,800 New York City public schools (Shapiro, 2020) and opens 439 sites for parents to pick up grab-and-go school meals. (City of New York Department of Sanitation, 2020) |
| March 18 | Governor closes all schools in the state and halts in-person classes at CUNY and SUNY, the state’s two public university systems. (State of New York Department of Education) |
| March 20 | Governor requires all non-essential businesses in NYS to close and bans non-essential gatherings. Governor enacts “M Amanda’s Law,” an executive order requiring those 70 and older to remain indoors. (State of New York, 2020c) |
| March 23 | City-run senior centers close and transition food services to home delivery. (City of New York, 2020d) |
| March 24 | New York City Transit Authority (TA) reduces bus and subway service by approximately 25% to accommodate smaller TA workforce and fewer riders. (Goldbaum, 2020) |

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*Note: The data in Table 1 is based on available sources as of March 2020.*
schools advised residents who did not need the extra money to redistribute the benefits received to those in need by using them and donating an equivalent amount to an emergency food organization, or by buying groceries with the benefits and donating the food to a local emergency food pantry. A New York City Council Member even coordinated with three supermarkets in his district to enable people who wished to donate their benefits to have the stores deliver the groceries purchased with P-EBT directly from the checkout counter to local emergency food providers and mutual aid organizations (Lander, 2020).

3.1.3. Leveling the Online Playing Field

In April 2019, USDA launched a pilot program in New York City to enable Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants to pay for groceries online using their SNAP benefits (Cohen et al., 2020). While initially aimed at providing lower-income consumers equal access to the convenience and large inventory of online grocers, the pandemic increased adoption of online grocery shopping as consumers sought to reduce supermarket trips to avoid exposure to COVID-19. USDA responded to the increased demand by expanding the SNAP online pilot to 47 states (USDA, 2020).

Despite its expansion, the pilot’s burdensome administrative requirements have limited participation to a small number of retailers, with Walmart and Amazon the only approved retailers in most states (Redman, 2020). In New York City, authorized retailers include ShopRite, which delivers to a limited area in the borough Staten Island, and Amazon and Aldi, which deliver in all five boroughs (Cohen et al., 2020). For independent grocers, especially small retailers, not only is the SNAP online pilot out of reach because of USDA’s technological and financial barriers, but so is any online ordering and fulfillment option because of the cost of creating an online platform and home delivery service.

To address disparity in access to online grocery shopping and to support local businesses, the Mayor’s Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity identified five high-need neighborhoods (Harlem, Mott Haven, Brownsville, Richmond Hill, and Stapleton) and created a city pilot to enable independent grocers in these communities to sell groceries online (Redman, 2020). The city partnered with the e-commerce company Mercato to provide ordering and delivery services and launched the pilot with 35 independent supermarkets as well as food retailers housed in public markets operated by the city’s Economic Development Corporation.

3.1.4. Economic Support

Dining restrictions, a steep drop in tourism, and the economic recession have resulted in substantial layoffs in the city’s food and beverage industry, which prior to the pandemic accounted for 1 in 12 private sector jobs (Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2020). The city has taken several steps to address the economic consequences of the pandemic on the restaurant industry in ways that extend beyond saving businesses and jobs by promoting livable wages, better working conditions, entrepreneurship, and employee ownership. The following policy changes also built on a decade of labor and social justice organizing in New York to increase the minimum wage and provide paid sick leave to a wider array of low wage workers, especially fast-food workers.

(a) The city created a restaurant revitalization program to sustain or re-start restaurants with two explicit equity aims: to support employment and food production in neighborhoods facing immediate needs and to advance equity as part of the city’s economic recovery. The program privileges restaurants that commit to “high road” practices defined as those “in which employers voluntarily commit to higher than legally required standards with respect to wages, racial and gender equity, and other core conditions of work” (New York City, 2020). This means that qualified restaurants must pay at least the full minimum wage (not including tips) to all workers within five years of returning to regular business practices post-pandemic and must report wages annually. In addition, applications to the program are scored based on fair employment practices, plans to make meals accessible to essential workers and low-income community residents, being in the city’s Racial Inclusion and Equity Task Force target neighborhoods, and a commitment to using local and regional produce and products that support the region (New York City, 2020).

(b) The city launched Employee Ownership NYC in December 2020 to provide business advisors to enable owners to transition their companies to worker-ownership (City of New York Office of the Mayor, 2020a). The aims is to support wealth creation among a new class of worker-owners and to help owners of businesses who might otherwise have difficulty finding buyers during the pandemic to sell their companies to employees instead of merely closing shop.

(c) The pandemic led to increased food delivery carried out by a largely immigrant workforce that often faces low wages, wage theft, and physical hazards. Many food delivery workers use bicycles, particularly electric bicycles, and have been stigmatized as dangerous to pedestrians and subject to racial profiling by the police (Lee, 2016). The city until recently banned electric bikes and fined delivery workers riding them and confiscated their bicycles. Recognizing the inequities of this ban on a vulnerable, low-wage workforce performing a service demanded by residents trying to reduce exposure to COVID-19, the city reversed course and legalized the devices, dismissing 68 previously issued summonses (Meyer, 2020). In January and April, 2022, the city enacted additional laws to protect delivery workers by: allowing delivery workers to set limits on the distance they travel from food establishments to customer homes; prohibiting delivery apps and couriers from charging delivery workers fees for their wages; establishing minimum per trip payments that delivery services must pay to delivery workers; requiring delivery services to provide workers with insulated food delivery bags; ensuring access to bathrooms; and requiring delivery apps to disclose customer tips to delivery workers.

(d) In 2016, the city enacted Local Law 11, the Grocery Worker Retention Act, to prevent wholesale firings when supermarkets changed hands by requiring the new owners to retain former workers for at least 90 days. In September 2020, for the first time, the city’s Department of Consumer and Worker Protection filed a successful lawsuit against a Key Food supermarket for illegally firing 21 grocery workers after purchasing the store, securing approximately $210,000 in lost wages and benefits and $27,000 in fines (City of New York Department of Consumer Affairs, 2020).

(e) As sit-down restaurants closed, fast food was often the only source of prepared hot food in many neighborhoods, making those employed at fast food restaurants a type of essential worker. Fast food establishments in New York City employ more than 67,000 people, 88% of whom are people of color, mostly immigrants and women (Center for Popular Democracy et al., 2020). Unfair terminations and reductions in hours are common in this sector, causing workers financial hardship and preventing them from speaking up about unsafe or illegal practices. On December 17, 2020, the New York City Council enacted two bills (Int. No. 1396-2019 and Int. No. 1415-2019) supporting fast food workers: legislation prohibiting fast food employers from firing workers without just cause and legislation requiring layoffs in fast food firms to be by inverse seniority so that those hired last are laid off first (Freytas-Tamura, 2020).
(f) To support restaurants and retain food sector jobs, the city created an Open Restaurants program that allowed restaurants with restrictions on indoor service to serve food on sidewalks and streets. Open Restaurants has enrolled more than 10,000 businesses and is estimated to have saved 90,000 restaurant jobs, approximately 55,000 of which are held by immigrants (Office of the NYS Comptroller, 2020). This new use of public space has involved creative design, such as the outdoor seating areas designed by non-profit organizations in congested neighborhoods like Chinatown (Imbrude, 2020). The City also expanded an Open Streets program, which closed approximately 85 streets to vehicle traffic for public use, allowing businesses in the Open Restaurants program to set up tables for dining in the traffic-free streets. Both initiatives represent a significant change in New York City’s use of public spaces compared to pre-pandemic, when New York City communities vehemently opposed the loss of parking spaces to uses such as bicycle lanes (Grynbaum, 2011). The popularity of the initiatives has led former Mayor de Blasio to initiate a process to make them permanent (New York City Office of the Mayor, 2020c).

The examples above illustrate policy responses designed to meet the immediate needs of the pandemic, such as distributing emergency food and financial assistance, ensuring access to grocers, and supporting the restaurant industry hurt by economic crisis. They show that the policies were also designed with equity goals: supporting vulnerable immigrant communities; redistributing resources; improving wages, working conditions, and job security; supporting the transition from conventional business forms to worker ownership; and reallocating the uses of public space.

4.1. Discussion and Conclusions

Before the pandemic, New York City faced significant problems related to food access, food security, and food affordability (Freudenberg et al., 2018). In addition, the city has faced other catastrophic events in recent history that have disrupted the food system, such as hurricane (“superstorm”) Sandy, which caused destruction to the New York metropolitan region in 2012 that affected access to fresh food, electricity and gas for cooking, and SNAP benefits (Schmelz et al., 2013).

The pandemic, and policies to curb its transmission, exacerbated these existing challenges. Self-quarantining and social distancing restrictions limited movement throughout the city, decreasing opportunities for people to buy food on the way to and from work, school, and other places they would typically frequent. Early in the pandemic, a reduction in transit service (Goldbaum, 2020) compounded the inconvenience of buying groceries for those who depend on buses and subways to get to and from the supermarket, and the virus made grocery shopping potentially risky. Pandemic-related difficulties in getting needed food were disproportionately experienced by Latinx and Black households and households with low income.

More significantly, the pandemic worsened food insecurity. Prior to COVID-19, just over 1 million New Yorkers were food insecure, relying on a patchwork of free school meals, other public agency and non-profit congregate feeding programs, volunteer soup kitchens and food pantries, and financial support from federal programs like SNAP (Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, 2019). For households with limited incomes and precarious employment, the economic disruption of the pandemic increased food insecurity and hunger to levels not seen in recent history. By 2021, the projected number of food insecure New Yorkers was approximately 1.4 million individuals (Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, 2022).

The crisis triggered various policy changes, some temporary and likely to end once the health crisis is over and others that open the door to more transformative changes. The city’s response to the pandemic was shaped by near-term public health challenges but also was the product of more than a decade of food activism in New York City by community-based organizations, labor unions, and progressive officials in the City Council and Mayoral administration. This suggests that while the shock of a crisis is often used to clear the way for regressive changes (Klein, 2007), crises can also be used to open the door for equity-enhancing measures. In New York City, food and social justice activism set the stage for this response to the pandemic.

By widening access to public food programs for immigrants, protecting low wage food workers from health-harming labor practices, expanding access to online food ordering to low-income communities and smaller food businesses, creating new opportunities to open worker-owned businesses, and making public spaces more available to restaurants by limiting space for car parking, New York City has shown that municipal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic attempted to advance a more equitable food system and a more just city.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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