

# The Study of Food Insecurity and Health Disparities In Houston Food Distribution Organizations

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## Background:

Food insecurity is briefly defined as the lack of access to affordable and nutritionally dense foods. The Kinder Institute found that an estimated 724,750 food-insecure individuals live in the Greater Houston area. Research indicates that food-insecure individuals are more negatively affected by health disparities such as obesity and diabetes. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of food insecure persons, especially those with pre-existing health conditions. In response, some food distribution organizations adjusted their operations to distribute food packages more safely and efficiently by adding drive-through distributions. Some offered educational assistance to food-insecure clientele by providing them with nutrition education and other resources with their food packages. This research is designed to explore the ways in which food distribution organizations changed their operations to address this vulnerability and whether changes to operational practices are likely to continue after the pandemic subsides.

## Purpose:

This research studies how food distribution organizations are meeting the needs of their food-insecure clientele during the pandemic. Through interviews, we identify the operational improvements their staff and volunteers recognize are important to the efficiency and continuity of their operations and to the security and well-being of the vulnerable population they serve.

## Methodology:

We will be conducting at least 20 telephone interviews in late-March 2021 with Houston food distribution organization staff and volunteers who serve on the front lines and in administration. The 14 questions are designed to better understand the ways in which food distribution organizations changed their operations during the pandemic. In addition, the interview gives insight on the how the changes of operations affect the efficiency and effectiveness of serving the clientele. Food distribution workers and volunteers will be recruited from food distribution organizations such as New Hope Housing Reed, Bread of Life Ministries, and Riverside United Methodist Church.

## Questions:

- Our team is interested in learning how food distribution organizations can better alleviate food insecurity. Please give your thoughts on this statement: A food distribution organization’s first mission is to provide a sufficient supply of food regardless of the quality [nutritious, healthy, fresh]. Has the pandemic changed your perspective on this statement?
- What would be *most* effective in serving your food distribution organization’s clientele: more volunteers, more food resources, or educational materials on nutrition? How has COVID changed your perspective?
- What concerns have your clientele expressed during the pandemic that you believe need to be addressed?
- We are also concerned with the health of the organizations’ clients. Does your food distribution organization consider the health needs of your clients together with food insecurity? Has the pandemic raised your awareness of the health needs of your food-insecure clients? If so, could you explain how?
- Would it help you to serve your clients better if you had information about their pre-existing health conditions?
- How do you envision the future of your food distribution organization once things return to normal?
- Do you think food distribution organizations are more effective as “brick-and-mortar” centers or as drive-through food distribution centers? How does the pandemic affect your response?
- In a “brick-and-mortar” center, what foods would you like to see first?
- In a drive-through food distribution center, what foods would you like to see distributed?
- Is there anything your food distribution organization just implemented during the pandemic that you see as beneficial to use *after* the pandemic?
  - Briefly describe your vision of a perfect food distribution organization. Does your organization live up to that standard?

## Analysis:

The goal is to create a profile for each of the organizations that participate to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between food insecurity and health disparities at a local level. The responses to the questions will allow us to evaluate the operational changes made during the pandemic, the effect on efficiency and effectiveness overall, and specifically, changes to heighten attention to food insecurity and health disparities.

## Results:

	Food Distribution's Primary Mission	Pandemic Shifted our Operations	Most Valuable Resource	Primary Clientele Concerns	Importance of Clientele Health Needs	Ideal Food Distribution Operations	Efficiency of Food Distribution Facilities	Adaptations After the Pandemic
Respondent 1								
Respondent 2								
Respondent 3								
Respondent 4								
Respondent 5								
Respondent 6								
Respondent 7								
Respondent 8								
Respondent 9								
Respondent 10								
Respondent 11								
Respondent 12								
Respondent 13								
Respondent 14								
Respondent 15								
Respondent 16								
Respondent 17								
Respondent 18								
Respondent 19								
Respondent 20								

**Figure 1:** Outline for data tabulation based on respondents’ answers to interview questions.

## Conclusion:

Data will be collected in late-March 2021 following final IRB approval.

## Further Study:

This research study opens the door to conducting future interviews with employees and volunteers from food distribution organizations. This allows for a deeper and more complete understanding of the impact of the pandemic on operations and how this, in turn, affected food insecurity and health disparities at a local level.

## References:

“Food Insecurity.” *Food Insecurity | Healthy People* 2020,“The Fight Against Food Insecurity Requires Teamwork, Not Competition, New Report Says.” *The Kinder Institute for Urban Research*, Parks, Courtney A, et al. “Food System Workers Are the Unexpected but Under Protected COVID Heroes.” OUP Academic, Oxford University Press, 25 June 2020.

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