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Hunger in Crisis: Food Bank Practices and the Social Safety Net

By

ALANA HAYNES STEIN
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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2024

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2024

Hunger in Crisis: Food Bank Practices and the Social Safety Net

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS .... **III**
ABSTRACT .... **VI**
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .... **X**
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION **1**

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HUNGER AND THE FOOD SYSTEM 11
THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING FOOD BANKS 17
A Brief Political Economy of U.S. Food Banks *20*
Food Bank Networks, Power, and Funding *22*
Privatization of Social Services *26*
Existing Critiques of Food Banks *28*
THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN INFLECTION POINT FOR FOOD BANKING 32
RESEARCH STRATEGY 36
ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION 37

CHAPTER 2. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF U.S. FOOD BANKS AND ITS RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY FOOD BANKING MODELS **42**

OVERVIEW OF THE FOOD-FOCUSED SOCIAL SAFETY NET 44
HISTORY OF U.S. NONPROFIT AND CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS 46
1600 to Mid-1800s *47*
Mid-1800s to 1929 .... *50*
1929 to 1980 .... *57*
1980 to Early 2000s *63*
THE “GARBAGE CAN” AND SOCIAL SAFETY NET PROVISION 64
GOVERNMENT FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS: FARM SUBSIDY OR A SOLUTION TO HUNGER? 68
The Food Stamp Program/SNAP *68*
The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) *73*
Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) *77*
Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) *78*
FOOD BANKS AS A SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM 79
IDEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO FOOD BANKING 85
The Traditional Charity Model *86*
The Personal Responsibility Model *88*
The Systemic Change Model *90*
CONCLUSION 93

CHAPTER 3. MODELS OF FOOD BANKING IN ACTION EXPLORING FOOD BANKS’ RESPONSES TO HUNGER THROUGH MISSIONS AND PROGRAMS **95**

FOOD BANK MISSIONS 97
The Traditional Charity Mission *100*
Missions that Address Hunger and its Root Causes *102*
Missions of Personal Responsibility *103*
Missions of Systemic Change *104*
Missions that Invoke Multiple Models *105*
FOOD BANK PROGRAMS 106
In-Kind Food Distribution *106*
PROGRAMS BEYOND FOOD DISTRIBUTION 123
Providing Resources Beyond In-kind Food *124*

Supporting the Public Social Safety Net ... *129*
"Root Cause" Programs of Personal Responsibility ... *136*
Root Cause Programs for Systemic Change ... *141*
DISCUSSION: DEALING WITH CONTRADICTORY MODELS OF FOOD BANKING ... 146
CONCLUSION ... 149

CHAPTER 4. MEASURING SUCCESSFUL FOOD BANKING ... 152

ORGANIZATIONAL METRICS AND FOOD BANKING ... 153
THEORY: PRESSURES TO CONFORM ... 156
FOOD BANKS' METRICS ... 158
Pounds of Food ... *159*
Measuring Health and Nutrition ... *169*
Measuring Outcomes that Correspond to Hunger and Poverty ... *175*
Operationalizing Equity: Measuring Systemic Change ... *178*
Measuring Workplace Success ... *183*
Measuring Nonprofit Legitimacy ... *185*
INFLUENCES ON FOOD BANK METRICS ... 188
CONCLUSION ... 195

CHAPTER 5. HUNGER FOR CHANGE: FOOD BANKS' POLITICAL FRAMING AND ACTIONS ... 197

FOOD BANKS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT ... 201
FOOD BANK POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS ... 203
An Apolitical Orientation to Food Banking ... *206*
A Bipartisan Orientation to Food Banking ... *210*
A Politicized Orientation to Hunger ... *216*
FOOD BANKS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT ... 218
Small-p politics and Educating the Public about Hunger and Poverty ... *219*
Big-P Politics and Dialogues with Elected Officials ... *222*
Big-P Politics and Policy Work ... *224*
Big-P Politics: Building Political Power and Voting Initiatives ... *232*
INFLUENCES ON POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS AND ACTIONS ... 234
Mission Fulfillment or Mission Drift? ... *235*
Board Influence ... *236*
The Costs of Advocacy ... *238*
Donor Appeals ... *239*
CONCLUSION ... 241

CHAPTER 6. SPATIAL DIFFERENCES IN FOOD BANK RESOURCES ... 244

SPATIAL MISMATCH OR SPATIAL EQUITY ... 247
GEOSPATIAL METHODS OVERVIEW ... 249
Near Poverty ... *250*
Race ... *251*
Urbanicity and Rurality ... *252*
Quintiles ... *252*
Food Bank Resources ... *252*
Food Bank Accessibility Using a Two-Step Floating Catchment Area (TSFCA) ... *253*
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON HOW FOOD BANK RESOURCES ARE DISTRIBUTED ... 254
Descriptive Statistics from the Food Bank Census ... *255*
Resources by Food Bank Type ... *258*
Descriptive Statistics on Food Bank Resources within 100 Miles ... *261*
SPATIAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS ... 270
SPATIAL VARIATION IN ACCESS TO RESOURCES ACCORDING TO FOOD BANK ADMINISTRATORS ... 276
Locations of Food Assistance Distributions ... *276*
Transportation of Food to Partner Agencies ... *280*

Geographic Disparities in Food Bank Funding and Donations ... *282*
CONCLUSION ... 284

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION ... 286

FEEDING PEOPLE TODAY AND TOMORROW ... 291
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW ... 293
Changing Food Banks Today ... *293*
Building Better Systems for Tomorrow ... *297*

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX ... 301

QUALITATIVE METHODS ... 301
Interviews ... *302*
Archival Materials ... *304*
Qualitative Analysis ... *305*
Ethics ... *305*
GEOSPATIAL METHODS ... 305
Case Selection of States ... *306*
Food Bank Database ... *306*
Internal Revenue Service Data ... *308*
USDA and Census Bureau Data ... *310*
Geospatial Data Analysis ... *311*
Regression Analysis ... *312*

REFERENCES ... 319

Abstract

This dissertation examines the privatized social safety net provided by the U.S. food banking system and the implications of relying on this network of nonprofit organizations to address the issue of hunger. U.S. food banks have been collecting and redistributing food waste to other nonprofit organizations that provide food directly to people since the late 1960s, and prior literature criticizes food bank structures for perpetuating inequities and detracting from efforts to enact systemic changes to the political economic system that produces hunger and poverty (e.g., Fisher, 2017; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018). However, the Covid-19 pandemic represented a moment of significant changes in both food banking and the framing of hunger and inequality in the United States. During this period, food banks were frequently represented in media portrayals as a response to hunger, and food banks became more central to the U.S. public and private social safety nets. Since Covid-19, food banks received increased resources, expanded to serve new organizations and people, made programmatic changes, and grew their focus on equity throughout their work. I found food banks have begun to shift their attention away from predominately being supply-driven, gleaning organizations that procure excess food toward being organizations increasingly focused on ending hunger and poverty. Thus, I examine how food banks and their administrators changed during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as how they situated their work within larger questions of how to address hunger and poverty.

To examine how U.S. food banks address hunger and poverty, I specifically explore: (1) How food banks distribute resources to address hunger, and what models, programs, and metrics they use to define their missions, guide their decisions, and reach goals; (2) How food banks respond to broader social and political contexts and changing ideas regarding hunger and

poverty; and (3) How food bank resources are distributed locally, regionally, and nationally, and how this influences the distribution of food to people in relation to poverty, race, and urbanicity. I draw on 62 interviews conducted from 2021 to 2022 with food bank administrators from across the United States, archival materials on food banking, and geospatial analysis of a nine-state Food Bank Census. I find food banks are working to center addressing hunger's root causes, but these changes are happening unevenly within the food bank sector and within individual food banks. Food banks are also grappling with competing ideologies around the root causes of poverty, which has led their structures to have be a patchwork of different ideological approaches to hunger. These findings elicit further questions of why food banks are implementing structures based on disparate ideologies for addressing hunger. Below, I briefly address findings from each of the above-listed questions and the further inquiries they provoked.

I find that food banks' missions, programs, and metrics align with three models of addressing hunger and poverty—the traditional charity model, the personal responsibility model, and the systemic change model. Under the traditional charity model, food banks alleviate hunger through food provision. However, some food banks are increasingly taking steps to end hunger and poverty using either individualized approaches under the personal responsibility model or structural approaches under the systemic change model. I find most food banks have missions and operate programs that fall under a hybrid of the three models, but I find that food bank metrics align heavily with the traditional charity model. I further explore why food banks simultaneously operate approaches rooted in multiple ideologies of addressing hunger. I find that food bank programs and metrics are heavily influenced by their efforts to please funding sources and signal their legitimacy as an effective response to hunger. Their economic model of fundraising through private dollars and administering government programs means that food

banking activities are all influenced by economic and political elites. Food bank programs are thus responsive to philanthropic trends of how to address hunger and poverty. However, they rarely discontinue programs, which has led to durable impacts from early donor trends. I find their metrics are the most mismatched with their missions because this is the key means they use to signal legitimacy to funding sources, which leads to an emphasis on always showing growth or success. Food banks' agency in determining their own metrics of success is further limited by specific reporting requirements from funding sources.

Additionally, I explore food banks' political advocacy and how they frame their own politicization. Food banks play a key role in framing to the public and policymakers how hunger in the U.S. should be resolved. I find that many food banks frame themselves as politically neutral, despite all food banks in my sample being involved in some form of political action. For example, food banks conduct educational campaigns about hunger, lobby for public policies, and control the distribution of billions of dollars of resources annually. For this reason, I further explore why food bank administrators depoliticize their work and how these efforts to depoliticize their work limit the scope of their political advocacy. I find that political advocacy work can be challenging to food banks' efforts to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the donors and public, especially as they begin to engage in practices that are in contradiction to the status quo. I further explore how food banks engage in politics to either effect change or uphold the status quo regarding social safety net policies and inequality. While food banks generally uphold the status quo, they are also increasingly creating systemic change through political organizing for social justice. I also find that food banks are increasingly using their economic and political power to effect systemic changes to the political economic system, such as through advocating for living wage policies. Despite the challenges food banks face in engaging in politically

divisive debates, I find that food banks are increasingly able to draw on new narratives that question the political economic system that has produced both hunger and the food banking system. Food banks are thus engaging in a two-part approach—feeding people who are experiencing food insecurity today while trying to prevent it in the future.

Lastly, to examine the constraints of relying on localized and privatized social safety nets, I examine geographical disparities in both food banks and their resources. I do not find evidence that such resources respond to levels of community need. Instead, I find resource differences based on racial demographics and urbanicity, which lead to an uneven social safety net that perpetuates existing inequities. These findings raise questions about how one's local food banking infrastructure can dramatically impact the available social safety net and why we are increasingly relying on these private systems to administer federal social safety net programs.

Together, these findings point toward the need to revisit the taken-for-granted assumptions of how to address hunger. Instead of trying to best redistribute the corporate food system's excesses to people experiencing poverty, a better social safety net could be built through centering the needs of people experiencing poverty and changing the systemic structures that produce poverty in such a wealthy nation.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Abbreviations

CSA:	Community Services Administration
EITC:	Earned Income Tax Credit
PDO:	Partner Distribution Organization (an official Feeding America designation below member status)
PRWORA:	The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996
SNAP:	The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TANF:	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
WIC:	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

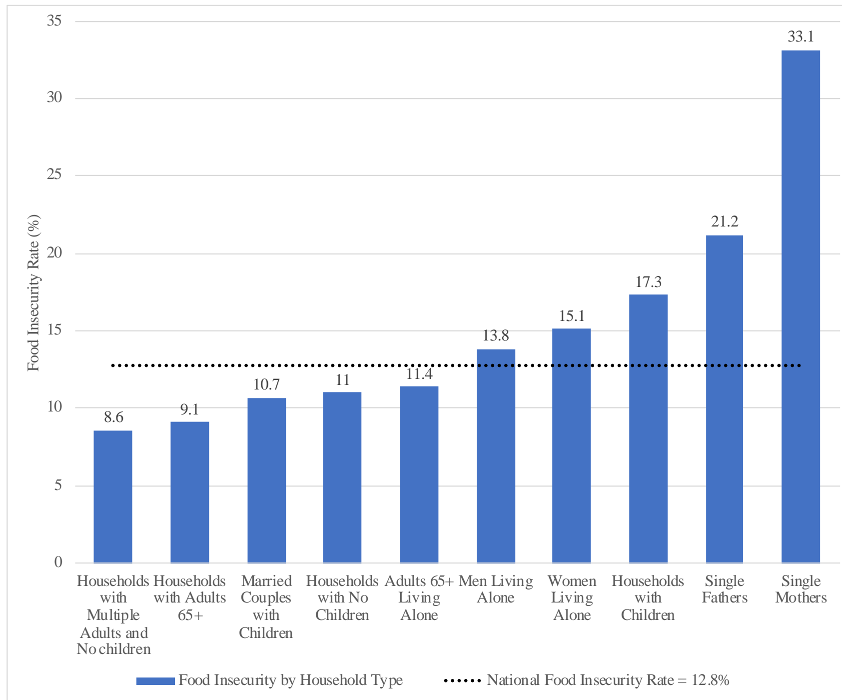
Despite the abundance of food in the United States, hunger remains a major social problem. Food banks are critical to the U.S. response to addressing hunger. I explore food banks in their political and economic context from their inception but with a strong focus on their evolving role during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, food banks were designed with more attention to mitigating agricultural and corporate food waste than to addressing hunger. Consequently, the creation, expansion, and institutionalization of food banks have led to an ineffective means of addressing hunger in the country. Food banks are nonprofit organizations that collect and redistribute food to other nonprofit organizations, distinguishable from other private food assistance providers by the role they play as hubs that redistribute food to other nonprofits, or partner agencies. Additionally, food banks can also supply food directly to people in need. During the past 50 years, food banks developed from small, grassroots, nonprofit organizations that focused on distributing food waste to becoming a network of professionalized

organizations in a multi-billion-dollar industry that involves fundraising, nutrition, data management, and political advocacy. Through acting as hubs and brokers in the public-private food assistance system, food banks control access to resources and set guidelines for smaller nonprofit organizations.

Over the past two decades, the food bank system grew due to increasing public and private investment. However, food insecurity did not decline over the same period, which suggests the inability of increased investments in food banks alone to reduce hunger within the context of rising inequality. The National Feeding America Organization's revenue increased more than eightfold since 2002 (America's Second Harvest, 2002; Feeding America, 2022b), yet food insecurity grew. When first measured in a standardized format in 2001, 10.7% of households were food insecure (Rabbitt et al., 2023, p. 11). Since 2001, food insecurity in the United States remained over 10%, rising as high as 14.9% after the Great Recession, with the most recent data suggesting that 12.8% of households were food insecure during 2022 (Rabbitt et al., 2023). This means that in each year since 2001, more than 1 in 10 households did not have sufficient food for all household members, which further means that they were unable to meet basic human needs. Obviously, food banks alone have not solved food insecurity. These figures occur against the backdrop of growing inequality from 1980 to 2016, rising inflation, and stagnation of the federal minimum wage to $7.25 per hour since 2009 (Horowitz et al., 2020; Saez & Zucman, 2016). Food banks also operate in concert with other federal, state, and local poverty alleviation and anti-hunger programs, such as school meal programs, food stamps, community kitchens, and Medicare.

Figure 1.1

Food Insecurity Rates by Household Composition.



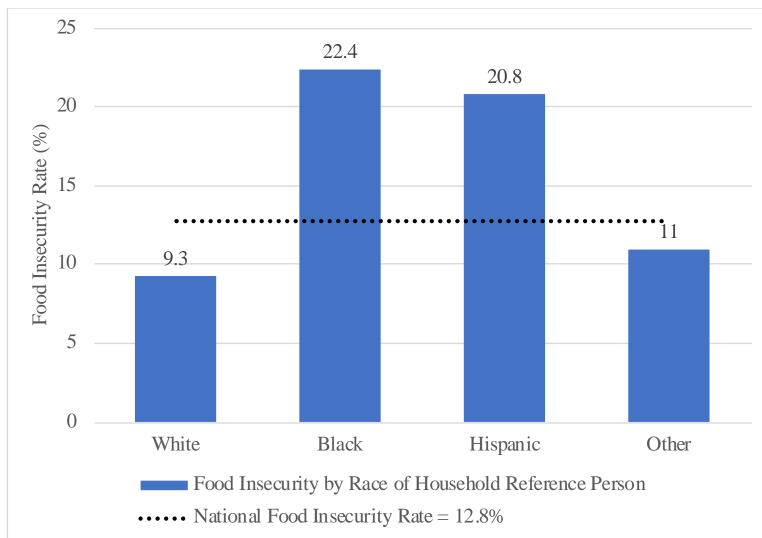
Note. Data from 2022 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (Rabbitt et al., 2023).

Food insecurity is experienced inequitably, and thus some groups are much more likely to experience it than the national average of 12.8% (Rabbitt et al., 2023). Lower-income groups are more likely to experience food insecurity, even though 31% of food-insecure households have incomes over 185% of the poverty threshold (Rabbitt et al., 2023, pp. 18–20). In 2022, food insecurity rates in Black (22.4%) and Hispanic (20.8%) households were more than twice that in White households (9.3%) (Rabbitt et al., 2023, pp. 18–20). Similarly, food insecurity rates were significantly higher in both urban (15.3%) and rural (14.7%) areas in comparison to suburbs (10.5%) (Rabbitt et al., 2023, pp. 18–20). Rates were also higher than average for women living

alone (15.1%) and single-parent households (33.1% for single mothers, 21.2% for single fathers) (Rabbitt et al., 2023, pp. 18–20). Households with children generally experience greater food insecurity (17.3%), though children themselves are less likely to experience it (8.8%) because parents commonly shield children from hunger (Rabbitt et al., 2023, pp. 9–20). Other groups with significantly lower rates of food insecurity than the national average include married couples with children (10.7%), households with no children (11%), households with seniors (9.1%), and seniors living alone (11.4%).

Figure 1.2

Food Insecurity Rates by Race of Household Reference Person.



Note. Data from 2022 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (Rabbitt et al., 2023). White, Black, and Other each refer to people who identified with that racial category and did not also identify as Hispanic.

Research suggests that gender, sexuality, disability, and immigration status also relate to food insecurity (Leslie et al., 2022; N. Schwartz et al., 2019; Sharareh et al., 2023). Transgender

and other nonbinary people are more likely to be food insecure than cisgender people, and non-heterosexual people are disproportionately food insecure, compared with heterosexual people (Leslie et al., 2022). People with disabilities also experience greater food insecurity (N. Schwartz et al., 2019), and immigrants experience higher rates than U.S.-born individuals (Sharareh et al., 2023). Many of these groups similarly struggle with access to both public and private food assistance since federal, state, and local anti-poverty and anti-hunger programs often use similar eligibility requirements. These rates suggest that food insecurity relates to broader histories of discrimination that marginalize certain groups.

The persistence of hunger in the United States, despite an abundance of food, suggests failures in the country's food distribution system. In this dissertation, I explore how food banking is shaped by its legacy as a means of disposing agricultural and corporate food waste. That legacy traces food banks' origins as (re)distributors of food waste noting that food banks were first created to support the corporate food system, comprising globalized corporate food production, distribution, and retail, a system that promoted privatization of the U.S. social safety net. [1]

In this history, food bank responses historically focused on distribution of food in-kind, supplying food products rather than monetary support. In a contemporary, market-based, capitalist society that overproduces and commodifies food, food insecurity is predominantly a result of economic insecurity and poverty (Fisher, 2017a; Holt-Giménez et al., 2012). Food in-kind can thus address food insecurity only in a limited way, in comparison to broad-sweeping

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[1] I provide additional context on the U.S. social safety net later in this chapter and further trace its history in Chapter Two.

interventions through public policy. Stopgap responses to poverty arise from food banks' origins as centralized distributors that collect food waste (Poppendieck 1998).

In the United States, food banks and the federal government have designed their programming to be more responsive to food waste than to hunger and poverty. I address what that history means for food distribution and insecurity in the United States, given its reliance on private, nonprofit food banks. Food banks have positioned themselves discursively as the solution to U.S. hunger, but they were not designed to do so. I thus explore the implications of U.S. reliance on food banks to address hunger. I specifically explore:

1. How U.S. food banks distribute resources to address hunger, and what models, programs, and metrics they use to define their missions, guide their decisions, and reach goals.
2. How food banks respond to broader social and political contexts and changing ideas regarding hunger and poverty.
3. How food bank resources are distributed locally, regionally, and nationally, and how this influences the distribution of food to people in relation to poverty, race, and urbanicity.

Since the current study was conducted during the pandemic, I had a unique view of food banks during a transformative period. Public health orders, social disruption, new federal safety net programs, and associated economic crises of the pandemic provided perspective on food banks' capacity to address societal food needs. Covid-19 exposed much about food banks and the networks on which they rely for support. The pandemic thus revealed a gray area between crisis and the customary order of things, in which poverty, race, class, privation, and food insecurity in the wealthiest society in the world became especially salient (Beamish, 2002; Molotch, 1970; Molotch & Lester, 1975). The pandemic, and events that unfolded during it, pushed federal and private donors to increase resources into food banks, motivating many food

banks to reevaluate their programs and develop new ways of distributing food and other forms of aid. The pandemic led to food banks being inundated with resources and public attention, increasing their power to respond to hunger and poverty—as well as the spotlight of expectations that they could solve the hunger crisis.

Both the federal government and public espouse food banks as a solution to hunger. While more Americans believe federal and local governments have significant responsibility for dealing with hunger (71 and 72%, respectively), more than half of the public (57%) believe nonprofits like food banks have significant responsibility for dealing with hunger (Hart Research Associates & Chesapeake Beach Consulting, 2014). The centrality of food bank networks to the U.S. social safety net was exemplified during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when they were a source of food for 60 million Americans, and when federal programs distributed through food banks nearly doubled (Feeding America, 2022a; Lohnes, 2023). The first White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health to be held in the past 50 years took place in 2022, which largely took a medicalized focus but also included food banks as part of its strategic response (The White House, 2022). Showing their commitment to supporting food banks, typically more than 2 million Americans volunteer with the Feeding America Network annually (Feeding America, 2022a).

During the pandemic, growing media attention turned to food going to waste in fields while food bank lines stretched for miles (Biron, 2020; Kulish, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Ma, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic was a moment for Americans to "rediscover" domestic hunger (Poppendieck, 1995, p. 11). Poppendieck (1995) argues that the U.S. underwent three periods of the discovery and rediscovery of hunger in the 20th century – the Great Depression, the 1960s, and the 1980s. She argues that claims-making around hunger in each of these periods impacted

the solutions that were developed, as the juxtaposition of hunger and abundance led to farm support programs in the 1930s, framing of the failure of government to ensure equal access led to reforms and expansion of public food assistance in the 1960s, and the framing of hunger as an emergency led to the development of private food assistance programs that were meant to be temporary solutions in the 1980s (Poppendieck, 1995).[2] I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a fourth period of "rediscovering" hunger in the United States, including claims-making that aligned with each of the prior periods – the paradox of hunger amongst surplus, criticisms of the failures or government and private organizations to ensure equity, and positioning the problem as a temporary emergency.

While claims makers framed the problem of hunger in several different ways, they still frequently pointed to food banks as a solution to this problem. Major news outlets frequently depicted food banks as an important response to hunger in major news outlets (Arango, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Ma, 2020; Parlapiano et al., 2021; Reiley, 2020). Celebrities also focused publicity on food banks as a pandemic response, such as was seen in a special Parks & Recreation episode to benefit Feeding America and large donations to food banks by MacKenzie Scott and Jeff Bezos (Ali, 2021a; Liao, 2020; Murphy, 2020). Thus, I explore how food banks themselves responded to the renewed spotlight on hunger and how they framed solutions to hunger during this period.

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[2] Food banks and the private food assistance system were formerly known as emergency food assistance organizations, which is terminology still sometimes used today. However, scholars and food banks have since pushed back on this framing as the "emergency" of hunger and the "emergency" response of food banks have persisted for over 40 years (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Martin, 2021). Therefore, I refer to the system as "private" food assistance rather than "emergency" food assistance.

The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to explore how the U.S. food bank system operates during a crisis and in what ways their organizational legacies shaped their approaches to an altered context of need. The renewed national attention to hunger, offered an opportunity for the "rediscovery" of hunger as a social problem, making room for hunger to be reframed and addressed through new methods (Poppendieck, 1995, p. 11). In this dissertation, I explore to what extent this happened and why food banks responded to the Covid-19 context in the way they did.

I find that the diverse and competing claims about hunger as a social problem found in the media are also present in food banks and among their administrators. Through interviewing food bank administrators and analyzing food banks' public messaging through their websites and news articles, I examine how food banks are framing the solution to hunger and their role in it. I identify three ideological approaches that ground how food banks respond to hunger, which are rooted in traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change. I further develop these in Chapter 2. I find food banks are sites where these competing frames interface and that food bank administrators are grappling with how to orient their organizations amongst these competing approaches to responding to hunger. Throughout my research, I explore why food banks take the approaches that they do, even when these approaches sometimes contradict other approaches at the same food bank or what their leadership believes is necessary to address hunger. Food banks strive to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of donors and the public. Thus, food bank administrators are constrained by their organizational legacies and influenced by those who hold power over them, leading them to adopt sometimes contradictory approaches in order to appease those with power. Food banks' past approaches are grounded in precedent, so pushing against the status quo raises more questions for food banks on whether their actions are

legitimate. Still, as broader claims-making about hunger and equity shifts towards pointing out the injustices in our food system, I find some food banks are able to build on these claims to explore solutions to hunger that were previously rare in food banking. These developments in food banking have pushed some food banks to critically reflect on the equitability of their own work. Thus, I explore a new shift in food banks that is responsive to the prior literature's critiques of the inequities of food bank practices (e.g., De Souza, 2019; Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2017; Garthwaite, 2016; McIntyre et al., 2016; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018). Additionally, I draw on new evidence from a multi-state analysis of food bank resources to examine the implications of relying on food banks as a primary solution to hunger. This analysis indicates geographical disparities in access to food bank resources and suggests that food bank networks and resources are not located to be responsive to levels of need. This evidence lends new support to prior theorizations on the inequitability of access to food banks by examining geographic patterns of food bank locations and resources at a larger scale. Building on the findings of the qualitative research, these inequities suggest that food banks are not responding to the needs of those experiencing hunger. Instead, these inequities suggest food banks are responding to funding, donors, and the corporate food system.

To foreground this exploration of food bank responses during the pandemic, I begin by outlining the political economy of hunger in the U.S. and the role food banks play in the U.S. social safety net. Next, I highlight how the pandemic provided a unique and significant context in which to study food banking while organizations adapted to new circumstances. I outline a methodological approach to studying food banks, followed by an overview of the remaining chapters.

Political Economy of Hunger and the Food System

Other scholarship has explored in depth the political economy of the food system (e.g., Holt-Giménez, 2017; Jurkovich, 2020; McMichael, 2009) and of food banks (e.g., Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2017; Lohnes, 2021; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018). I provide a brief overview of this framework to orient the reader to the context that undergirds this research.

While this research focuses on the United States, the contemporary period is characterized by a globalized, corporate food regime (Holt-Giménez, 2011; McMichael, 2009). The present globalized food regime is characterized by a de-localized system where food regularly travels many miles and across borders and where control of food production and distribution is consolidated under a small number of large multinational corporations (Deener, 2020; Holt-Giménez, 2011; McMichael, 2009). The intensified roles of global monopolies, fossil fuels, and free trade rhetoric (but not necessarily practice) distinguish the current corporate food regime from prior global food regimes (Holt-Giménez, 2011; McMichael, 2009). Histories of slavery and settler colonialism also shape the U.S. and global food systems, especially influencing who has access to money, land, and food (Green et al., 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2017; Norgaard et al., 2011; Shostak, 2023). The large farms and multi-national corporations that dominate the U.S. food production system are sometimes referred to as "Big Ag" or "Big Agriculture"(Ashwood et al., 2022). The term refers to the consolidation of power in a handful of companies as exemplified by fewer than 15 companies controlling more than half of the world's seeds and pesticides (Clapp, 2013). This term also parallels Marx's terminology of "big industry," which he invoked to signal the rise of industrial actors and the complex division of labor which came to dominate over trade itself (Marx, 1846, p. 185; Tregenna, 2013).

Within the United States (and globally), hunger results from poverty and inequality rather than food scarcity (Fisher, 2017a; Holt-Giménez et al., 2012). As part of this globalized food system, the United States produces more than enough food to feed its residents, but more than one-third of the food produced in the United States each year is never eaten (Jaglo et al., 2021). This uneaten food contains enough calories to feed more than 150 million people for a year, which is more than far more than the estimated 44 million food-insecure Americans in 2022 (Jaglo et al., 2021; Rabbitt et al., 2023).[3] These trends of overproduction persist at the global level as well, although the United States is one of the countries with the highest levels of food waste across both food per person and total food wasted metrics (Jaglo et al., 2021). Global food production is also far more than enough to feed every person (World Food Programme, 2020). In speaking of how our political economic system, shapes our relationship with food, Holt-Giménez (2017, p. 233) claims, "Capitalism is the silent ingredient in our food…[millions of] people living in poverty in the richest country on earth – many of whom grow, harvest, process and serve our food -can't afford to be foodies because they're too busy worrying where their next meal is coming from." Thus, hunger is tied to addressing inequities in the political-economic system rather than to a need for technological innovations to produce more food (Holt-Giménez et al., 2012).

Contemporary definitions of food insecurity and poverty frame U.S. hunger as tied to economic shortcomings and inequality. In fact, the USDA's definition of food insecurity is based on whether "a household has enough money to meet its basic food needs," emphasizing the role

[3] Notably, food-insecure Americans already have access to and are eating some food, which means this overabundance could be used to feed far more people globally.

of insufficient economic resources in producing food insecurity (Rabbitt et al., 2023, p. 8). In response to the inadequacies of the U.S. official poverty measure, Berner and Vazquez (2018, p. 17) suggest poverty should be conceptually redefined as a household's ability to "put healthy, sufficient food on the table… on a predictable, regular basis." They argue that hunger and food insecurity is a key characteristic of the experience of poverty (Berner & Vazquez, 2018).

Beyond shaping experiences of poverty, food and agriculture have a key role in the global political-economic system and the development and global expansion of capitalism that produces poverty and inequality (McMichael, 2009; Shostak, 2023). Issues surrounding agriculture, food, and its commodification were topics of concern for political economists, such as Marx and Polanyi (Marx, 1847, 1858, 1867; McMichael, 2009; Polanyi, 1944). However, despite rich foundations in early social theory, sociologists largely have relegated the topic of food to the disciplinary margins (Shostak, 2023). Both Marx's and Polanyi's theoretical explorations of capitalism provide important context for understanding the issue of hunger amidst an abundance of food.

Food intake is essential for human life and, with it, for humans' ability to labor and reproduce, which led it to be a topic of concern for early social theorists. Both Marx and Polanyi considered the enclosure of the commons to be a key event that led to capitalism as we know it (Marx, 1867; Polanyi, 1944). The enclosures of the Commons, which Polanyi frames as "a revolution of the rich against the poor" were a key force that dispossessed lower classes from their access to land and therefore access to food for subsistence (Brinkley, 2020; Marx, 1867; Polanyi, 1944, p. 37). This shift forced people into wage-laborer relations, as they could no longer had access to a means of producing food to eat (Marx, 1867). Thus, societal relations to food and agriculture are deeply tied to the capitalist system.

Marx further theorized about how changes to agriculture, marked the shift to capitalism. Marx distinguishes capitalism from prior periods in part by the basis of the relationship between land, agriculture, and capital (Marx, 1858, pp. 242–243). He argues that capitalist society is distinct from prior societies in that "agriculture more and more becomes merely a branch of industry, and is entirely dominated by capital" (Marx, 1858, p. 243). He argues the industrialization of agriculture is particularly important as the process replaced peasants with wage-laborers and drains "the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer" (Marx, 1867, p. 556). He points to both the exploitation of laborers and nature, as industrial agriculture to support urbanized populations spread. These unique distortions of humans' relationship to food and agriculture were key to fueling capitalist expansion via primitive accumulation (Holt-Giménez, 2017).

Beyond addressing changed agricultural relations as a key condition of capitalism, Marx also focused on how poverty and hunger relate to the conditions of the working class. Marx was deeply concerned with the conditions of poverty, including hunger, amongst the working class (Marx, 1867). He characterized the abysmal conditions and poverty of the working class as driven by the capitalist system (Marx, 1867). He characterized capitalists as continuously seeking profit by minimizing the wages necessary for subsistence, thus driving down the living conditions of laborers (Marx, 1847). Beyond documenting the suffering caused by hunger and poverty as an outcome of capitalism, Marx also highlights the importance of changing these conditions. Marx claims, "people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain, food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity" (Marx, 1846, p. 169). This sentiment aligns with the rights to food, clothing, housing, and medical care included in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948). Marx's argument demonstrates how hunger is directly tied to capitalist relations.

Like Marx, Polanyi also focused on capitalism's distortions of human relationships with food and land, which became a cornerstone of his theory of fictitious commodities (Polanyi, 1944). Polanyi argues that the free, self-regulating market is a fallacy because it relies on what he terms "fictitious commodities" (Polanyi, 1944, p. 71). Polanyi defines commodities as "objects produced for sale on the market," and thus argues that labor, land, and money are thus fictitious commodities because they were not produced for the market (Polanyi, 1944, p. 75). The fictitious commodities of labor and land are both closely tied to food, and point to the conflicts that arise with the commodification of food in our present capitalist system (Holt-Giménez, 2017; Polanyi, 1944). Polanyi defines labor as "another name for human activity, which goes with life itself" and land as "nature, which is not produced by man" (Polanyi, 1944, p. 75). Since food is essential for human life and produced by the land, the commodification of food is thus fictitious. This assertion of food as a fictitious commodity does not mean that food is not commodified. Instead, Polanyi argues that the fictitious commodities demonstrate the impossibility of a truly free market and underscore the need for state intervention (Block, 2001; Polanyi, 1944). Polanyi argues that as the market further encroaches on fictitious commodities and people's ability to live (as in the case of the commodification of food and resulting food insecurity), this sparks a "double movement" of social protection that aims to protect human life and nature (Polanyi, 1944, p. 138). Polanyi details how this protectionist movement may take shape as either socialist or fascist countermovements, arguing that both may occur in response to liberalist economic policies (Polanyi, 1944).

Polanyi's theory of fictitious commodities highlights the tensions that arise from the commodification of food present in our contemporary political economic system. His argument emphasizes the role of state protections to ensure that people are able to put food on the table and thus live. Polanyi's theory outlines the need for protective state policies for both farmers and workers (Block, 2001). While the U.S. does have substantial farm supports in place (see Chapter 2), protective state policies for workers are quite limited.

Protective state policies in the form of social welfare policies play a key role in determining the extent of poverty and who it impacts and how poverty is experienced (Brady, 2009; Brady et al., 2017; Rank, 2023). The United States has an exceptionally weak welfare system when compared with other wealthy democracies (Brady, 2009; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Rank, 2023). Among wealthy democracies, the U.S. has some of the lowest social welfare expenditures alongside the highest rates of poverty (Brady, 2009). In his comparison of wealthy democracies, Brady (2009) finds that a more generous welfare state reduces poverty; key aspects of a welfare state that can reduce poverty include the decommodification of labor, higher social welfare expenditures, more social security transfers, and higher government expenditures. More recent analysis of OECD countries finds that U.S. social welfare policies are least effective at reducing poverty compared with other high-economy countries (Rank, 2023). Brady (2009) finds that more generous welfare states occur where unions are strong, Leftist parties have been in power, women are present in the legislature, and where people have proportional representation. Thus, politics have a direct effect on the welfare state and, through it, levels of poverty and food insecurity (Brady, 2009).

Public assistance in the U.S. has formed a social safety net that predominately supports certain people, who are considered part of the "deserving poor." This categorization of a

"deserving" poor reflects society's moral views on who is deserving of assistance, and which groups of people are considered among the "deserving poor" has changed over time (Katz, 2013). "Deservingness" of assistance has been highly characterized along racialized and gendered lines, and in recent decades "deservingness" has become more closely linked with work and the concept of the "working poor" (Katz, 2013, p. 3). Significant welfare reforms occurred under the Clinton Administration's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), slashing cash welfare supports (Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003; Poppendieck, 2014b). Compared with other OECD nations, the U.S. is heavily reliant on food assistance rather than cash transfers for people experiencing poverty that are more abundant in other nations (Poppendieck, 2014b). Only 60% of states have any cash assistance available for non-disabled adults without children (Poppendieck, 2014b, p. 177). Within the United States' limited social safety net, food assistance (like those through food banks and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the food stamp program) takes on a more important role for people experiencing poverty (Poppendieck, 2014b). Since the 1980s, federal food assistance programs have been increasingly distributed by private nonprofit organizations, predominantly food banks (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lohnes, 2021). Thus, this dissertation explores the U.S. food banking system, which has developed through public and private initiatives to form a limited safety net within the context of our commodified food system.

The Importance of Studying Food Banks

Food banks represent an important case for sociological examination because they provide a unique context in which to examine social safety net policies, distribution of resources

to people in poverty, and changes to social service-oriented nonprofits. Peculiarities of U.S. social welfare policy increase the importance of food banks in the social safety net. The gap left by inadequate cash support programs, combined with the privatization of food assistance, makes food banks central distributors in the U.S. social safety net. An inadequate welfare state and high poverty rates amidst abundance set the backdrop for the creation of food banks. The creation and expansion of the U.S. food bank system arose in response to waste in the corporate food system, people's desire to address poverty and hunger, and a policy environment supportive of food banks (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lohnes, 2021; Poppendieck, 1998). However, this combination did not result in nonprofit programming that could adequately address hunger, because it did not center the root causes of hunger or the actual experiences of people in poverty. Although private food assistance does distribute a considerable amount of resources that help stave off severe hunger , the private food assistance system has been criticized for being insufficient, inequitable, undignified, and undermining the right to food (De Souza, 2019; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; McIntyre et al., 2016; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018). Despite their central role in the U.S. social safety net, research on how food banks across the country operate and respond to hunger is limited, leading to substantial knowledge gaps regarding the implications of privatized and in-kind social safety nets particularly in response to high levels of need during the pandemic. I build on this existing literature by exploring what food banks' responses looked like during the new context of the pandemic and why they responded through a mixture of means grounded in charitable distribution of in-kind food, pushing people in poverty to take personal responsibility for their situations, and pushing for systemic change to end the experiences of poverty.

For this research, I define a food bank as a "Private, charitable organization that collects food and then redistributes the food it collects to other charitable organizations and programs (including food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters); however, it may also directly distribute food to people in need of food assistance."[4] In their role as resource hubs, food banks hold an important position of power within the private food assistance system. As private, nonprofit organizations that distribute a combination of public and private resources, food banks bridge the public and private social safety nets. They hold considerable influence in who has access to these resources as well as in influencing perceptions of how hunger should be addressed. The Covid-19 pandemic led to food banks' becoming even more central to the public and private social safety nets. Therefore, I explore how food banks address the problem of hunger in the United States by examining their missions, programs, self-evaluation through metrics, and political positioning, ultimately exploring what this means for the United States' heavy reliance on food banks as administrators of the social safety net. I then further contextualize what it means to rely on food banks as administrators of the social safety net by examining the equitability of the geographic distribution of food bank resources.

I provide a more detailed history of U.S. food assistance programs and food banks in Chapter 2, but here I focus on outlining some of the key existing scholarship that frames this dissertation. In the sections that follow, I briefly detail the political and economic factors underpinning the food bank system. Then, I discuss the power of food banks today as well as their funding streams. Next, I highlight concerns about privatizing social services as well as the

[4] See the Methodological Appendix for a more detailed definition and explanation of its basis.

important role food banks play in the U.S. social safety net. Finally, I summarize existing critiques of the food bank system.

A Brief Political Economy of U.S. Food Banks

The first food bank, St. Mary's Food Bank, was established by John van Hengel in 1967 in Phoenix, Arizona to distribute excess food from fruit orchards to other nonprofit organizations (Poppendieck, 1998). The U.S. government's Community Services Administration then initiated and funded the establishment of a national organization named Second Harvest to spread St. Mary's food bank model nationally (Poppendieck, 1998). Second Harvest was named for food banks' roots in gathering and redistributing excess food (Poppendieck, 1998). Second Harvest was renamed Feeding America in 2008 to reflect the organization's change of focus to addressing hunger in the U.S. (Feeding America, 2008). Additionally, federal support for agricultural programs has played a key role in building the heavily food-based, American social safety net (see Chapter 2 for more details). Federal agricultural supports and commodity programs have played a key role in making food the focus of the U.S. social safety net and in institutionalizing food banks (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Poppendieck, 1998). The rise of private food assistance has been supported and expanded through state interventions in the founding of Feeding America and continued support through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Poppendieck, 1998). The institutionalization of food banks has been pushed further by the scaling back of federal and state welfare programs (Poppendieck, 2014b), which have created large gaps in the social safety net.

Food banks primarily operate in the corporate global food system, and these systems have grown together to mutually reinforce each other since the 1990s (Deener, 2020; Fisher, 2017a). Through government-subsidized tax incentives, food banks enable corporations to continue to

operate exploitatively and inefficiently because food banks provide a form of corporate welfare (Fisher, 2017a; Lindenbaum, 2016; Lohnes, 2021). Federal tax codes incentivize corporations to donate food to food banks by allowing them to recover the cost to produce the food plus up to half of its fair market value (Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes, 2021). Such tax benefits, combined with positive public relations from charitable donations and allowing corporations to avoid paying landfill fees, shield corporations from the economic deterrents of overproducing food (Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Lohnes, 2021; Riches, 2018). Many corporations, including Walmart, which has close ties to food banking through donations and board membership, rely on public and private food assistance programs to subsidize employees' insufficient wages (Fisher, 2017a; Lindenbaum, 2016; Poppendieck, 2014b). Such corporations espouse food banks and the charitable anti-hunger movement as they work to depoliticize the issue of hunger (Riches, 2018). Focusing on charity as a solution to hunger obscures corporations' failure to pay sufficient wages, which causes widespread food insecurity among food system workers (Lindenbaum, 2016; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2023; Minkoff-Zern, 2014). Through leadership positions on food bank boards of directors, representatives of the corporate food system help to drive the agenda of food banks (Fisher, 2017a). These circumstances led food banks to center how to most efficiently redistribute corporate food waste in their operations, without giving the same attention to how to best address hunger. In the present context, I explore how some food banks are shifting more of their attention towards centering the means to most effectively address hunger in a way that promotes their clients' dignity.

Given inadequacies and barriers of the U.S. public social safety net (Brady, 2009; Desmond, 2023; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003; Poppendieck, 2014b; Ray et al., 2023; Tach & Edin, 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2018), the private social safety net assists with

mitigating extreme material hardships for millions of Americans. Food banks are primary actors in the private social safety net because food assistance is more readily available and accessible than other forms of private aid (Bloemraad et al., 2023; Bouek, 2018b; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Food banks thus became "a safety net for the safety net" (Riches, 2018, p. 87).

Food Bank Networks, Power, and Funding

Feeding America Network. Initially created by the federal government, Feeding America is now the leading charitable organization in the United States based on the amount of private contributions received (Barrett, 2023). While food banks exist outside of the Feeding America Network, Feeding America holds a monopoly on food banks in the United States, controlling contracts over a significant portion of corporate food system donations (Bouek, 2018a; Costanzo, 2020a). In 2021, the National Feeding America Organization reported distributing over $4.1 billion in resources (Feeding America, 2022a). According to Feeding America, 60 million people accessed the Feeding America Network during 2020 (Feeding America, 2022a). The organization is a national nonprofit with offices in Chicago and Washington, D.C., overseeing a network of local, state, and regional food banks and partner agencies. The National Feeding America Organization uses its resources to influence the food banks in its network (Bouek, 2018a). The National Feeding America Organization has also implemented its own internal market to allocate these resources within its network (Fisher, 2017b; Prendergast, 2017). The National Feeding America Organization further influences its members and their partner agencies through its reporting requirements and metrics used to evaluate food banks (Lohnes, 2019).

In this dissertation, I refer to the National Feeding America Organization to describe the national organization, and the Feeding America Network to denote the nationwide network of

more than 200 Feeding America food banks and state associations. However, not all U.S. food banks are in the Feeding America network, despite the organization controlling much of the discourse on food banks. I categorize food banks as Feeding America food banks,[5] Feeding America Partner Distribution Organization (PDO) food banks,[6] and independent food banks to denote whether and in what ways they are affiliated with Feeding America.

In studying food banks both within and outside of Feeding America' network, I build on existing scholarship that examines field dynamics of organizations, nonprofits, and food banks (Bouek, 2018a; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kluttz & Fligstein, 2016; Oncini, 2022; Suárez, 2020). Existing nonprofit and organizational theories suggest food banks will be influenced by other organizations in their field and that they interact with (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suárez, 2020). Scholarship on food banking within the U.S. has shown the National Feeding America Organization exerts considerable influence on its network of food banks (Bouek, 2018a; Lohnes, 2019). The National Feeding America Organization also manages competition over resources by defining service areas and securing contracts with national organizations that prevent competition form independent food assistance organizations (Bouek, 2018a). Research in the UK has indicated that independent food banks and those belonging to their monopoly (the Trussell Trust) refer to their distinctions as independent or Trussell Trust members do distinguish between organizations in the field of food banking, but that they also draw connections of similarities (Oncini, 2022). By researching both Feeding America and independent food banks in

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[5] The National Feeding America Organization does not recognize PDOs as food banks in the Feeding America Network, but I treat them as such because they fall within the definition of food banks that I use, playing the same role in distributing food to partner agencies.
[6] I also include Feeding America Redistribution Organizations (RDOs) in this category due to their rarity and similar status.

the United States, I provide context on how food banks in the U.S. differentiate themselves along these lines and where sites of competition over resources and contestation of what a food bank should be are occurring in the field of food banking. I find some of these contestations occur between food banks in the Feeding America Network and independent food banks. I also find differentiations within each of these categories, particularly amongst different types of Feeding America food banks as well as between religious and secular food banks.

Food Bank Funding. The food banking industry annually manages and distributes billions of dollars of resources. Food banks' role as resource distributors has continued to grow as private food bank funding increases and new government programs continue to invest in them. TEFAP funding rose exponentially from (an inflation-adjusted) $688 million in 2017 to $2.75 billion in 2020 due to the Trump administration's trade policies and additional pandemic support (Lohnes, 2023). The new USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program is investing nearly $1 billion in federal funding for agricultural products to be funneled into the private food assistance system, in addition to existing TEFAP allocations (USDA, 2022a, 2022d). Food banks represent a primary group to receive food from this program (USDA, 2022d). By distributing a billion dollars of public funds as well as multiple billions of private resources to nearly 1 in 5 Americans, food banks demonstrate their centrality to the U.S. social safety net.

Since hunger persists in every county in the United States (Hake et al., 2022), food banks must fundraise to try to approach meeting demand. As food banks attempt to increase supplies and resources, they must frame themselves as legitimate to donors and funders. This makes food banks susceptible to coercive isomorphic pressures – that is, formal and informal pressure to adopt structures and practices similar to organizations on which they are dependent, such as funders and regulators (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Food banks experience such pressures from

governments, corporations, and the National Feeding America Organization – the largest regulator of food banks in the United States (Bouek, 2018a). As food banks compete for funding and donations, they are incentivized to adopt corporate and governmental structures and practices and advocate for solutions that uphold market-based structures (Fisher, 2017a; Riches, 2018). Such approaches fail to address underlying problems of inequality and exploitation and they recreate barriers to accessing assistance based in narratives regarding who are the "deserving poor" (Haynes Stein, 2023; Katz, 2013).

Food banks also commonly focus on children and seniors because they lend legitimacy to operations since they represent groups who are considered part of the "deserving poor" (Bouek, 2018a; Fisher, 2017a; Katz, 2013). Children and seniors are, however, overrepresented in federal social safety net programs,[7] and they have lower rates of food insecurity than other age groups (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022). Working-age adults without children and, to some extent, parents of children remain more food insecure and under-served because they are not targeted in either public or private social safety net programs. Focusing food assistance on populations that already experience lower rates of food insecurity exacerbates inequities because such groups are provided further advantages while populations with higher rates of food insecurity are unable to access the same programs. Nevertheless, food banks continue to serve the "deserving poor" to appeal to donors and funders (Bouek, 2018a; Fisher, 2017a).

Political Power. Existing critiques of food banks argue that food banks uphold the inequitable status quo and undergird the corporate food system (Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes & Pine, 2023;

[7] Several federal programs target children and seniors, including Social Security Income, Medicare, National School Lunch Program, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

Riches, 2018). However, Lohnes and Pine (2023) argue that the potential of food banks to be agents of social change needs to be further explored. Prior research on food banks in Chicago indicates that food banks influence how hunger is conceptualized in their communities, how their communities respond to hunger, and that they control which organizations participate in the local private food assistance system through access to their resources (Warshawsky, 2010). In the early 2000s, Warshawsky (2010) found that food banks were disconnected from social justice and equity and largely promoted workfare programs. However, more recent scholarship has begun to focus on how food banks are increasing their attention to social justice and dignity (Lohnes, 2023; Martin, 2021).

Brulle and Norgaard (2019) trace how institutional social inertia maintains the status quo and limits systemic changes to address climate change. Institutional social inertia maintains the status quo through organizational constraints that push organizations to maintain the status quo in their decision-making processes (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Munck af Rosenschöld et al., 2014). In examining food banks, I explore the extent to which their political actions seek to uphold the status quo compared with their efforts to create systemic change to the existing social order that leads to the inequities of hunger and poverty.

Privatization of Social Services

Sociologists have extensively studied social safety net programs, which include Medicare, Social Security, TANF, EITC, SNAP, and WIC (Danziger, 2010; Gregory et al., 2015; Hays, 2003; Tach & Edin, 2017; Warlick, 2017). Yet sociologists have devoted less attention to the increasingly privatized social safety net run by private nonprofit organizations such as food banks, even though the government contributes substantial funding to it. Private, nonprofit control of food banks makes them particularly important to approach sociologically. Over the

past half-century, policymakers have shrunk the welfare state, and with it the social safety net while private, nonprofit organizations (and for-profit endeavors) have grown to address many formerly government-run functions (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Clemens (2017) and Ray, Herd, and Moynihan (2023) argue that the state can use nonprofit programs to carry out discriminatory distribution processes. Historically, those in power have administered public assistance through private, nonprofit organizations to assist people on an individualized basis, frequently incorporating racialized burdens (Clemens, 2017; Ray et al., 2023). Privatization of government aid creates further inequities because it reduces people's ability to make rights-based claims for assistance and equal treatment (Clemens, 2017; Ray et al., 2023). Growing reliance on a privatized social safety net should be a topic of concern to sociologists and the public due to the potential for unequal access and failure to meet people's basic needs.

Food Banks' Important Role. Food banks and the private food assistance network represent critical food sources for food-insecure people who are ineligible for public social safety net programs, such as undocumented immigrants (Carney, 2015a). However, immigrants turn to nonprofits for help less frequently than people born in the United States (Bloemraad et al., 2023). Food banks are also more accessible, with less bureaucratic red tape than public programs (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024). In some cases, there is no screening process for private food assistance pick-up. As a result, an estimated 1 in 5 Americans accessed the private food assistance network during 2020 (Feeding America, 2022a), and Feeding America distributed more than 6 billion pounds of food that same year (Feeding America, 2021b). This compares with 1 in 8 Americans receiving SNAP benefits through the federal government in 2022 (USDA, 2024a). Some private food assistance programs provide clients with $2,000 annual value (Fong et al., 2016), and they

shield people from hunger, particularly when SNAP benefits run out near the end of the month (Fan et al., 2021). Together, these combined public and private social safety nets are credited with keeping hunger rates from rising during the Covid-19 pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021; Feeding America, 2022a).

Existing Critiques of Food Banks

Proponents of food banks celebrate food banking as a win-win solution to food waste and hunger, yet their ability to meaningfully address either is questionable. Despite the proliferation of food banks since the 1970s, food waste has continued to grow (US EPA, 2023). U.S. food banks recover only 3.2% of post-harvest food waste (Riches, 2018). They also fail to lower food waste because U.S. government tax codes incentivize corporations to maintain overproduction and donate to food banks, rather than create more efficient systems (Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Lohnes, 2021). Food insecurity has also remained constant (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022).

The win-win premise is further deteriorating because food banks are shifting their model away from distributing excess food. The Covid-19 pandemic and recent food inflation have highlighted the limits of the food bank model. When food banks move from redistributing surplus food to purchasing food in the market, they change their role in the food system. Shortages of excess food might create new possibilities for addressing hunger and poverty by creating a space for food banks to step away from their gleaning roots, and yet many food banks perpetuate the food charity model by purchasing food, even if it leads to budget deficits (Driscoll, 2022). This evokes questions as to why resources are being directed through a charitable model empirically tied to inequities rather than directly to people in need or toward rights-based approaches.

Existing research has indicated a number of ways that charitable food assistance is both stigmatized and inequitable. However, most of this research has focused on a single food bank or handful of organizations at a time rather than assessing the network of private food assistance organizations. Charitable food assistance is highly stigmatized and creates inequity based on race (Bruckner et al., 2021; De Souza, 2019; Haynes Stein, 2023; Poppendieck, 1998). In her groundbreaking research on U.S. food banks, Janet Poppendieck (1998) studied food banks across the U.S., and found them to be inaccessible, inadequate, inappropriate, undignified, inefficient, insufficient, and unstable. Yet this research has not been updated with a similar scale U.S.-based social research project since food banks have become further institutionalized (McIntyre et al., 2016), particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Several veins of existing research have examined how inequalities rooted in ideas of "deservingness" are present in private food assistance programs. Research on two food assistance organizations in Minnesota found that private food assistance organizations enact racialized stigma and also valorize a neoliberal work ethic (De Souza, 2019). Research on one Feeding America food bank found that food banks have focused on targeting populations that appeal to donors – particularly children and the elderly (Bouek, 2018a). Other scholars highlight how the private food assistance system is inequitable in regard to race, gender, urbanicity, ability status, and religion (Bolger, 2021; De Souza, 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Garthwaite, 2016; Haynes Stein, 2023; Waity, 2016). This research contributes to this body of scholarship by examining the pervasiveness of the emphasis on the deserving poor within food banks as well as the decision-making practices behind implementing these programs.

In addition to this research on the inequitability of food assistance programs, research has found inequalities in the availability and access of food assistance based on the location of

organizational providers, suggesting a weakness of relying on a privatized and variable social safety net. The location of food banks has important implications (Strong, 2020), yet the relationship between food banks and their communities has been understudied. In Brinkley's (2017) analysis of local food systems in Chester County, Pennsylvania, she found that the locations of a food bank is important, as the food bank's affiliated organizations were spatially closer than other organizations in the local food system who tended to be connected with more geographically distant organizations.

Yet research that examines the spatiality of food banks has tended to be small in scale and offers discordant results on geographic inequities in private food assistance (Allard, 2009; Bacon & Baker, 2017; Waity, 2016). While each of these studies found inequitable outcomes based on demographic characteristics, the relationships between different demographic variables and food assistance locations varied, especially when considering interaction effects. In a study of service-based social assistance in the three cities of Los Angeles, Washington DC, and Chicago, Allard (2009) found assistance is less prevalent in areas of high poverty. However, studies in Indiana (Waity, 2016) and Santa Clara County, CA (Bacon & Baker, 2017) that measured urbanicity and poverty found an interaction effect in which urban, high-poverty areas are the best served by food assistance organizations while less dense, high-poverty areas are the most poorly served. Allard (2009) was the only author to include racial demographics as a variable, finding racial inequities with predominately Black and Hispanic areas having less assistance than predominately white areas. I build on this body of literature by examining these three variables in concert and by examining food banks across a broader, multi-state scale. Furthermore, I focus not just on the location of food banks but also on the amount of resources

they have to further understand how the heterogeneity of food banks may be impacting local social safety nets.

Existing research points to several limitations with the food bank system. However, food banks have adapted in recent years, and this research also seeks to explore the potential for food banks to change their structures to better address the issue of hunger. Despite these limitations, food banks are continually changing, adapting in response to critiques and changing policies. Scholars have documented how food banks are beginning to engage in new roles that contest the role they have held in supporting the current corporate food regime and its corresponding inequities (Lohnes, 2023; Lohnes & Pine, 2023). Food banks shifted from providing primarily pre-packaged food that was criticized for its nutritional content to distributing greater amounts of fresh produce (Deener, 2020; Martin, 2021; Vitiello et al., 2015). Food banks are also supporting local food networks, especially the resilience of small farmers (Brinkley, 2017; Brinkley et al., 2021; Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Vitiello et al., 2015). They are redistributing resources to historically marginalized communities through food programs (Ali, 2021b), and they are working to create a more sustainable and just food system through programs that support local farmers of color (Jaffe, 2023). Poppendieck (2014b) argues that despite the shortcomings of food banking in addressing hunger, food bank staff play an important part in enrolling people in public assistance programs and fighting cuts to federal social safety net programs. Lohnes (2023) traces new directions for food banking, outlining that food banks have the potential to advocate for food justice. Given increasing reliance on food banks and their origins as supply-driven organizations, I examine how food banks address the problem of hunger in the United States. I use the unique ways that the Covid-19 pandemic encouraged food banks to confront their missions, programs, and role in addressing hunger and inequality to illuminate the role of food

banks in the U.S. social safety net. I explore how food banks both serve to maintain the status quo of the public and private social safety nets post-welfare reform, as well as their many efforts to change public policies and their own organizational structures.

Taking on these changes involves shifting their organizational practices away from a model that has been driven by the excesses of the corporate food system. Although food banks have increasingly promoted themselves as organizations that seek to end hunger, they have primarily implemented programs based on their roots in food waste. The continuous supply of excess food from the corporate food system led food banks to focus on using this excess to address hunger rather than exploring other options that most align with the desires and needs of people experiencing hunger. Throughout their history, food bank responses focused on in-kind food distribution, supplying food rather than monetary support. Providing food in-kind does not address the underlying issues of poverty. Instead, it is a downstream intervention, a stopgap response to hunger that arises from food banks' legacy of gleaning operations. Food banks are ultimately supply-driven organizations, which means they cannot meet demand for services because they can only distribute as much food as they receive through donations and government commodities. Unlike federal programs like SNAP, which are responsive to increases in applications, food banks, as private organizations that distribute donated excess food, always have finite resources available to them. This means that food banks do not have the necessary resources to respond to needs during crisis or more typical times.

The Social Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Inflection Point for Food Banking

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which reflects an important and unique period for food banking. I use the disruption to organizational practices caused by the

pandemic as an opportunity to understand food banking better by drawing on the methodological tradition of "accident research methodology" (Beamish, 2002, p. 8; Molotch, 1970, p. 143). This methodological tradition uses "the breakdown of the customary order" to expose information about social structures that are otherwise difficult to observe (Molotch, 1970, p. 131,143). While the pandemic was not an accident caused by food bank staff, its sudden and largely unanticipated onset led it to be similarly illuminating. The pandemic increased pressures on food banks as they experienced an economic crisis, supply chain disruptions, and a changing public health context. However, the pandemic also led to heightened public awareness of inequities and work that food banks do, leading to increased visibility, resources, and political power. I outline the broader social context of the pandemic and how it provided opportunities for food banks and myself as a researcher to understand how food banks operate.

The pandemic created an economic crisis that impacted millions of Americans, driving demand for food bank services. Some food banks reported that demand tripled during the first months of the pandemic, and demand remained high throughout 2022, with high inflation impacting household finances (Driscoll, 2022; Lakhani, 2020; J. Ludden, 2022). U.S. unemployment increased from 3.5% in February 2020 to 14.8% in April 2020, reaching its highest since measurement began in 1948 (Falk et al., 2021). These rates do not reflect those who left the labor force permanently, with estimates suggesting adjusted employment was 22.7% in April 2020 (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021). These economic shocks were not experienced equally; low-wage workers and women of color experienced the largest decreases in employment (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021), and these same groups were already experiencing greater food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

The pandemic disrupted supply chains, particularly in the food system, whose products are influenced greatly by the environmental constraints of agriculture and whose products are subject to spoilage. Initially, food banks experienced decreased donations, as bulk buying left supermarkets without the excesses that the industrial food system would typically donate. Another important source of food donations, those from restaurants and the hospitality industry, was also largely shut down (Kulish, 2020). Food banks thus increasingly began to purchase food, shifting their model of food acquisition away from redistributing excess food (Costanzo, 2021a). Supply chain disruptions influenced food bank partnerships, donations, and purchasing practices, and heightened inflation impacted food banks' resources, particularly for organizations that purchased food.

Food banks also had to modify their programming and operations in response to public health requirements and guidelines. Historically, the food bank model relied heavily on volunteer labor, which was disrupted by stay-at-home orders during the pandemic (Botts et al., 2020). Food bank labor shortages led to deployment of National Guard troops to help sort and distribute food at food banks (Botts et al., 2020; Sanchez & Said, 2020). Many smaller nonprofits that served as partner agencies for food banks closed, leading food banks to increase the proportion of food that they distributed directly (De Faria, 2021). Food banks also pivoted to drive-thru distributions and home delivery programs because crowded, indoor distributions with long lines were no longer possible. The pandemic created a context of rapid change for food banks that highlighted organizational practices, pushing the boundaries of what food bank administrators believed their organizations could accomplish. Although the pandemic created new challenges for food banks, it also created new opportunities.

Both the pandemic and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement during the same period created new public discourse on how inequity in the United States is perpetuated and addressed. The public's attention turned to systemic racism, as mass protests occurred across the country in response to George Floyd's murder by police and other acts of racial violence.[8] Food banks responded to protests along with corporations and philanthropic foundations that sought to address inequalities publicly in response to the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement (Brownen-Trinh & Orujov, 2023; Costanzo, 2020c; Kinderman, 2022; Kraeger, 2022; Purtell & Kang, 2022). During the pandemic, public attention was paid to inequities among corporations and funders, and the public pushed food banks to take on new political positions. Simultaneously, food banks drew public attention during the pandemic when the media featured their efforts to respond to people's increased economic precarity. Many food banks began to engage in dialogues on how the coronavirus impacted poor communities of color disproportionately and how those same communities were also most impacted by the economic crisis. Increased public attention on hunger during the pandemic focused on the state's role in addressing the issue, evidenced in Oleschuk's (2022) study of tweets on hunger and the pandemic. This context led to increased attention to systemic inequities that lead people to need food assistance.

Increased public attention also brought new streams of resources to food banks. The pandemic and public media attention led new resources to flow into food banks that took the form of new and expanded government programs and funding, new food system partnerships,

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[8] The past decade and the pandemic, in particular, represented a period of extreme political polarization in the U.S. (Evans & Hargittai, 2020; Perry, 2022; Skocpol & Tervo, 2019). While public attention to systemic racism grew during this period, this was also met with a racialized counter-movement that pushed against calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion (T. Alexander et al., 2023; Malcom, 2024).

and increased donations from corporations and private individuals. Increased resources, combined with public attention, led food banks to imagine new possibilities.

By conducting this study during the pandemic, I observed food banks during an inflection point that pushed them to reevaluate their practices and values. Food banks became increasingly central to public and private responses to hunger and financial insecurity. Examining food banks during an abnormal time highlights the assumed beliefs and practices that constitute the status quo. Food banks emerged from the pandemic with more resources and power, heightening the importance of understanding the implications of relying on these organizations.

Research Strategy

I used a mixed-methods approach that incorporated in-depth interviews, secondary document analysis, and geospatial analysis, an approach that allowed me to triangulate findings by comparing food banks across multiple dimensions while also assessing how food banks operate as a network of nonprofits. By focusing on the national level across various types of food banks, I could draw conclusions beyond the individual level. I used qualitative analysis to conduct exploratory research on food banks' approaches, and I used quantitative analysis of food bank resources to test extant theories on food bank resource distribution.

I conducted 62 in-depth interviews from 2021 to 2022 with food bank administrators who held leadership roles at food banks and associated non-profit organizations. To be considered a food bank, and organization had to distribute food to at least one other organization (see Appendix for detailed definition.) I refer to my sample of interviewees as food bank administrators (N=62), signifying their role in decision-making within the food bank sector. Most interviewees were presidents, CEOs, or executive directors (n=39). Most worked at food

banks or organizations operating food banks (n=51), but I also interviewed people at food bank associations (n=6) and other nonprofit organizations in the food bank industry (n=5). I also collected and analyzed publicly available materials on food banking organizations, both in and outside my sample. I found these materials during web searches on food bank websites, in the trade publication *Food Bank News*, in news articles on food banks, and in public Internal Revenue Service (IRS) documents. These qualitative data sources allowed me to examine how food bank administrators approached their work and portrayed it when they described what they did, how they did it, and how they engaged with the public.

I used geospatial analysis to assess food banks' resources and how they are distributed geographically in relation to race, poverty, and urbanicity. I built a novel, comprehensive database of food banks, representing a census of food banks in nine, purposively sampled U.S. states. I paired these data with food banks' publicly available financial data from the IRS and demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau. I analyzed the data using descriptive statistics, maps, spatial accessibility measures, and regression analysis. For more details on the data and methodology, see the Methodological Appendix.

Organization of the Dissertation

In *Hunger in Crisis: Food Bank Practices and Their Impact on the Social Safety Net*, I address how food banks fit into the U.S. social safety net and what their efforts mean for ending hunger in one of the world's wealthiest nations. In the introduction, I depict the critical role food banks play in the U.S. social safety net, outlining factors that make it essential to examine food banking following the Covid-19 pandemic. I also describe the methods I used to do so.

Chapter 2 traces the historical context that explains how and why food banks became central actors in the United States' response to hunger. I begin with an overview of the historical context of nonprofit organizations and responses to poverty in the United States. I then examine why food banks developed to respond to hunger with a focus on distributing both public and private sources of in-kind food. I trace the inception, growth, and institutionalization of food banks, which I contextualize with the development of other public food assistance programs in the country. I explore how food banks originated as a response to food waste that has been used as a conveyor of corporate welfare and to privatize the social safety net. I argue that food banks, and the broader network of public food assistance in the United States, derive from programming that did not prioritize ending or even addressing hunger and its root causes. I then outline how several moral ideologies regarding social services provision influence food bank decision-making and food distribution practices.

Chapter 3 draws on empirical data to demonstrate how food bank approaches connect to three ideologies that shaped U.S. responses to people in poverty—traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change. I use these ideal types to elucidate the contradictions held within food banks. I connect food bank missions with these approaches, demonstrating that most food banks ascribe to tenets of multiple models I then trace how food bank programs, both those that distribute food and other products and service programs that attempt to end hunger, align with these models. Since food banks are adopting competing approaches to addressing hunger within the same organization, I explore why their programs have developed in such a way. I show that food banks are still influenced by their legacy, even as they move into new areas that seek to address the causes of hunger.

Chapter 4 draws on interviews and secondary sources to evaluate the metrics of food banks, which suggest that many food banks are characterized by a misalignment between their organizational mission and the metrics they seek to fulfill. Such inconsistencies impact food banks' abilities to execute their missions and address hunger. These inconsistences raise the question of why food banks measure their success through metrics that do not align with their missions. I trace how their metrics are often shaped by their efforts to signal legitimacy and by the historical trajectory of food assistance organizations and the moral ideologies associated with social services provision in the United States. I detail how isomorphic pressures shaped the structures of food banks, particularly through coercive isomorphism in which private donors, Feeding America, and the government heavily influenced food banks' decisions and metrics. Misalignment of metrics has important implications for food banks' ability to achieve their missions. It also impacts the ability of clients and the public efforts to hold them accountable. I find that in comparison with programs, metrics were a site of uncertainty and disagreement among food banks. Food bank administrators frequently described their dissatisfaction with existing metrics and their plans to adopt new metrics. Food bank administrators' diverging views on how to measure a successful food bank signals a key area of contestation over what food banks should be. These metrics and their debates raise important questions over whether food banks should be oriented around the redistribution of food or around ending hunger and to what extent the latter can be achieved without more openly working to change public policy and/or the corporate food system.

Using interviews and secondary sources, Chapter 5 explores food banks' engagement with policymakers and political advocacy. For decades, food bank administrators have claimed to engage in an apolitical model to address hunger and inequality, a model that some of them are

starting to recognize as upholding the status quo. My efforts show that food banking is clearly political. As organizations involved in setting policy agendas (Riches, 2018; Warshawsky, 2010), food banks actions and inactions are inherently political, whether or not a food bank vocally supports any policies. Historically, the institutionalization of food banks has supported the maintenance of the globalized food system, weak social welfare policies, and exploitative inequities of capitalism. However, the pandemic created an inflection point in food banking, leading many food banks to reevaluate their programs, missions, and strategies. I explore how food bank administrators situate themselves in the current polarized political context, and I explore the narratives they draw on to legitimize those positions. I find that food bank administrators describe their organizations as nonpartisan, bipartisan, or taking a politicized orientation. Despite this, all administrators described how their food banks engaged in political actions. Nonetheless, their politicized orientations did correspond with the types of political actions they took and the extent to which these actions supported the status quo or pushed for systemic changes. This elicits the question of why food banks frequently seek to depoliticize hunger and their own efforts. I trace how the real and perceived reactions of donors and policymakers influence food bank administrators' decisions in whether or not the engage in political actions that seek to disrupt the current system. Food bank administrators draw on the public image of a nonprofit organization and their missions to legitimize their political approaches. These findings have important implications for understanding how privatizing social services to donor-dependent organizations impacts efforts to reduce inequity. Corporate donors still heavily influence food banks' approaches, but some organizations are increasingly creating systemic change and taking up social justice approaches. These findings point to new potentials for food banks to become involved in advocating for social justice, but also caution that elite

influence still holds many food banks back from pursuing the paths their leaders think can best address hunger.

In Chapter 6, I step back to examine the internal variability of the food bank network. Private food assistance organizations have been criticized based on theoretical arguments regarding their localization of responsibility of addressing the needs of people in poverty (Strong, 2020). This chapter draws from geospatial analysis to examine disparate levels of resource accessibility. I explore how the distribution of both food banks and their resources impacts the accessibility of private food assistance. Quantitative measures are supplemented with interview data that informed decisions regarding quantitative analysis, elucidating mechanisms that lead to geographic disparities when accessing food bank resources. I find that urban areas have greater access to resources than rural areas. Furthermore, I find food bank resources are not responsive to levels of need, but are associated with racial inequities in urban areas. These findings identify a gap in the existing research – if food bank resources are not responsive to needs, why are they located where they are? Qualitative interview findings suggest these resources are geographically located in part based on where corporate food system excess are located as well as in response to local philanthropic organizing. Interviews with food banks showed that in the context of insufficient resources, food banks provide more resources to their geographically proximate partners.

Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the results of each chapter. I synthesize what these data and findings suggest about U.S. reliance on food banks. I place findings in closer discussion with broader conversations on social service organizations, food justice, and public policy. I also provide recommendations to researchers and food assistance practitioners concerning ways to study and address issues of hunger and inequality more effectively.

Chapter 2. The Historical Context of U.S. Food Banks and its Relation to Contemporary Food Banking Models

Abbreviations

CFAP:	Coronavirus Food Assistance Program
CSA:	Community Service Administration
FAO:	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IRS:	Internal Revenue Service
LFPA:	Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program
PRWORA:	The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996
SNAP:	The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TEFAP:	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
USDA:	United States Department of Agriculture
WIC:	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

This chapter historically situates food banks and their approaches to their work by tracing development of nonprofits, food assistance, and the origination of food banks in the United States. As primary distributors of government commodity food programs, food banks represent a critical nexus of public and private responses to hunger. I thus frame food banks in the broader history of U.S. food assistance policy and development of nonprofits and charities in the United States. I show that the dominant approaches to public and private food assistance in the country were not developed with the primary intention of ending hunger and inequality. Instead, food assistance programs arose in response to agricultural surpluses and corporate food system inefficiencies. By outlining this history, I situate and expose the influence this legacy has on food

banks, showing them to be organizations driven by the solutions they offer rather than the problems they seek to address.

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, an inflection point for food banking and a period that revealed how the food banking system has operated for decades and forced many food banks to begin to change. Food banks grappled with the pandemic, rampant inflation, and increased national attention on diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations. These forces pushed many food banks to reevaluate their programs and reformulate approaches to food provision. For example, many food banks increasingly purchased food during the pandemic, rather than rely on donated food to supply their programs. Many food banks I studied were trying to move away from being gleaners who gather excess food, and instead move toward being organizations that end hunger.

As food banks reoriented their focus from redistributing food waste to ending hunger, they became part of broader debates on poverty. In the political-economic system of the United States and other wealthy nations, hunger is an outcome of economic precarity and inequality (Riches, 2018). Food banks thus situate their work in broader ideological frameworks to address poverty. I find that food banks' approaches align with three ideological frameworks that address poverty—traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change. Before discussing these frameworks, I provide an overview of the role food plays in the U.S. social safety net. I outline the history of poverty alleviation and nonprofit organizations in the country, and I examine how the legacy of food bank origins and prominent ideologies for addressing poverty influence contemporary food banking. I then outline an organizational theory called "the garbage can model of organizational decision-making," to explain how the development of U.S. food assistance programs and food banks reflect an ad hoc, solutions-looking-for-problems model that

is at odds solving the food insecurity problem in the U.S. Given increasing reliance on food banks and their origins as supply-driven organizations, I examine how food banks address hunger in the United States, focusing on how food banks align their work with their chosen approaches to address poverty. Finally, I trace how these historically situated approaches continue to influence contemporary food banks and how and who they distribute resources to in the U.S.

Overview of the Food-Focused Social Safety Net

The United States is unique in its heavy reliance on the provision of food to found its social safety net (Poppendieck, 2014b). Since the 1980s, cash assistance has diminished and food assistance has increased (Daponte & Bade, 2006). U.S. public assistance is distributed primarily through means-tested programs that provide goods or vouchers for specific items rather than cash assistance or cash assistance (Katz, 2013). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), colloquially known as "food stamps," is the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) largest food assistance program (Lohnes, 2021). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) led to SNAP becoming one of the few supports accessed by Americans as cash support declined (Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003). Yet SNAP participation is not associated conclusively with reductions in food insecurity (Gregory et al., 2015). The next largest USDA programs—school breakfast and lunch programs, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—are limited to children and pregnant women (Lohnes, 2021). The USDA's second largest program without age requirements is The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which channels surplus commodities into private food assistance organizations, including food banks (Lohnes, 2021). When SNAP benefits are insufficient, people must turn to

the private food assistance system, which has also proven to be inadequate to the task of feeding people experiencing hunger in the U.S. (Dickinson, 2019; Fan et al., 2021).

As in the public social safety net, in-kind food is the most abundant and readily accessed resource in the private social safety net (Bloemraad et al., 2023; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Food banks are central providers in the U.S. private food assistance network, supplying more than 60,000 other organizations with food (Feeding America, 2022a). Since the United States scaled back welfare, it has increasingly relied on the private charity system, including the private food assistance system, to address inequality (Daponte et al., 1998; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Lohnes & Wilson, 2018; Parson, 2014; Poppendieck, 1998; Rodriguez, 2007). The rise of private food assistance has been supported and expanded through state interventions, such as the founding of Feeding America and continued support through TEFAP (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Poppendieck, 1998).

In her account of the symbiotic state, Clemens (2017) argues that this process of the state contracting its responsibilities to private organizations, such as nonprofits, foments social inequalities and hinders citizens' abilities to assert their rights to equal access to government resources. Clemens' analysis of the state's privatization of services substantiates concerns about how food banks hinder people's right to food (De Souza, 2019; Riches, 2018; Riches & Silvasti, 2014). For instance, Strong (2020) conceptualizes welfare reform and the proliferation of food banking as a localization of responsibility that inequitably burdens the most impoverished and marginalized communities with what was formerly the state's responsibility. If private assistance represents a last resort for people who have fallen through the public social safety net, it is thus critical to protecting people from extreme material deprivation (Riches, 2018). Private food

assistance has been shown to exacerbate inequalities if it is based on the same neoliberal ideas of "deservingness" as is the public social safety net (Haynes Stein, 2023).

History of U.S. Nonprofit and Charity Organizations

Nonprofits and the infrastructure of charitable organizations in the United States arose from and have been shaped by several social motives and legal classifications. The term *nonprofit* is often used colloquially to refer to organizations that serve the public, but it reflects a much broader and differently defined group of organizations as evidenced by discussion in the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) listserv (R. Steinberg et al., personal communication, 2023). Nonprofits are also commonly characterized as a third sector of society, distinct from government and businesses (Hall, 2006; R. Steinberg et al., personal communication, 2023). A frequent criticism of the referent "nonprofit" reflects that it is based on what they are not, rather than for what they are (Wyland, 2023). Efforts to replace the terminology have been resisted because of its institutionalization as reflected in its colloquial, legal, and academic uses (Wyland, 2023).

Defined narrowly, *nonprofit organizations* refers to organizations' classification under sections 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and more recent iterations of the code (Hall, 2006; Internal Revenue Code of 1954, 1954). Such organizations include "nonstock corporations and trusts formed for charitable, educational, religious, and civic purposes which are exempt from taxation and to which donors can make tax-deductible contributions" (Hall, 2006, p. 32). Nonprofit organizations thus include 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations, political parties, trade associations, "formal and informal voluntary associations, non-stock corporations, mutual benefit organizations, religious bodies, charitable trusts, and other nonproprietary entities" (Hall, 2006, p. 32). Such organizational purposes might apply to

contemporary understandings of the nonprofit field, but this common grouping and classification of such heterogenous organizations was not predetermined. Hall (2006) argues:

> Every aspect of nonprofits that we consider distinctive—the existence of a domain of private organizational activity, the capacity to donate or bequeath property for charitable purposes, the distinction between joint stock and nonstock corporations, tax exemption—was the outcome of unrelated historical processes that converged and assumed significance to one another only at later points in time. (p. 32)

I draw on historical research (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020) to trace the history of U.S. nonprofit and charitable organizations, which are tied to Western ideas of property, responsibility, and religion. Although charitable practices have rich histories in other locales, I focus on the history that developed between the United Kingdom and colonization in the United States; this most directly shaped the political economy of present-day US nonprofits in the present.

1600 to Mid-1800s

While present-day legal nonprofit designations did not arise until much later in history, British colonists brought notions of charity with them when they settled North America (Hall, 2006; Hammack, 2002; Soskis, 2020). Contemporary legal definitions of charity in the United States and United Kingdom derive from the Elizabethan Statute of Charitable Uses of 1601 (Horwitz, 2020; IRS, 1980), which allowed funds to be set aside for:

> Relief of aged, impotent and poor people, some for maintenance of sick and maimed soldiers and mariners, schools of learning, free schools and scholars in universities, some for repair of bridges, ports, havens, causeways, churches, sea-banks, and highways, some for education and preferment of orphans, some for marriages of poor maids, some for supportation, aid and help of young tradesmen, handicraftsmen, and persons decayed; and others for relief or redemption of prisoners or captives, and for aid or ease of any poor inhabitants. (Modern English Translation) (IRS, 1980)

Colonists brought this legal codification of charity with them, which was in effect in the American colonies throughout British colonial rule (Soskis, 2020). During British colonization in

the 17th and 18th centuries, self-governing institutions were common in the form of townships, churches, and a few colleges, but the concept of "purely private corporations in the modern sense" was nearly non-existent (Hall, 2006, p. 33). Charitable giving was made difficult because colonial courts did not enforce charitable trusts (Hall, 2006). During the mid-18th century, several influential figures, such as Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, and Jonathan Edwards, began to spread voluntary associations, including the Freemasons, philanthropy, and evangelical religious associations, a collection that helped to fuel the American Revolution (Hall, 2006). During the early years of the United States, founding fathers James Madison and George Washington voiced concerns about the threats that such associations posed in shifting power to small groups of powerful people in opposition to democratic principles (Hall, 2006). The nation was new, and both conservatives and liberals opposed "associations (which could accumulate unlimited political power) and corporations (which could accumulate unlimited economic power)" (Hall, 2006, p. 35).

Despite these concerns, voluntary associations, corporations, and charitable organizations became more popular during the early 1800s (Hall, 2006). They became an important way for small groups to wield political influence and a mechanism to mitigate financial investment risks and general risks associated with wage labor in urban settings (Hall, 2006). Associations were also fueled by new religious groups splitting off from traditional religious powers (Hall, 2006).

Charitable organizations and bequests had limited legal protections in early U.S. history. In 1816, the governor of New Hampshire took public control of Dartmouth College, which was upheld in the state's supreme court on the grounds that since the corporation's legal standing was created by the government, Dartmouth was beholden to the state's will (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Ultimately, a Dartmouth alumnus took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1819

case *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. William H. Woodward*, arguing that this public takeover violated individual property rights because charitable donations represent a contract between donors and trustees (Hall, 2006). The case established some distinction between what was public and private, and it cautioned government authorities not to delegate essential tasks to private organizations that would lie outside of their control (Soskis, 2020).

However, the legitimacy of charitable organizations remained tenuous until an 1844 U.S. Supreme Court case secured the right of individuals to form charitable trusts (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Even after the ruling, numerous legal conceptualizations persisted at the state level. New England states tended toward a broad characterization of charity that encouraged many types of charitable activities through tax exemptions, including educational, historical, artistic, scientific, medical, missionary, and athletics (Hall, 2006). Other states defined charities narrowly as organizations that must provide services freely or with no fees to benefit specific groups of people that the state deemed to be legitimate recipients of charity (Hall, 2006). States with broader charity definitions and incentives thus encouraged greater development of charitable organizations (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020).

Elizabethan notions of charity laid the foundation for the creation of tax-exempt organizations, but voluntary associations and private institutions also flourished due to the desires of the wealthy to exert cultural and political influence (Hall, 2006). Alexis de Tocqueville (1838, p. 160) characterized voluntary associations as “chief weapons” of the elite, in addition to public presses. During the mid-19th century, northeastern elites built tight networks of cultural, educational, and charitable institutions whose extensive endowments were controlled by overlapping groups of wealthy board members (Hall, 2006). Wealthy people used their positions on their boards to collectively make economic decisions that lay outside of democratic control

(Hall, 2006). Non-elites also began to use associations for various purposes, including forming professional associations, creating agricultural markets, and spreading evangelical social reforms such as temperance and pushing for "work among the poor" (Hall, 2006, p. 38; Soskis, 2020). Voluntary associations were important to socially excluded groups and people without voting rights (e.g., women, immigrants, Jewish Americans, and people of color), who invested heavily in voluntary associations in response to their disempowerment in other venues (Soskis, 2020). Through their roles in governing corporations, women were able to exert legal rights to sue, make contracts, and control real estate, from which they were restricted as individual women in the mid-19th century (Ginzberg, 1990; Soskis, 2020). With urbanization, associations began to replace families and communities in their traditional roles as caretakers, particularly to mitigate risk through mutual aid societies (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Risk-spreading, self-help organizations were particularly popular among African Americans in the North, who were disregarded by public and other private social welfare organizations (Soskis, 2020). In 1848, approximately half of all African American adults in Philadelphia were part of a mutual aid society (Soskis, 2020, p. 33). However, those who sought to perpetuate slavery also wielded associations to advance their positions (Hall, 2006).

Mid-1800s to 1929

Before, during, and after the Civil War, voluntary associations restructured, leading to the creation of national associations as groups on both sides of slavery mobilized (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). People also formed national associations in response to other issues, such as caring for people with disabilities (Hall, 2006). Despite activists pushing Congress to appropriate resources for the more humane treatment of people with disabilities, President Pierce vetoed the

bill in 1854 because he considered public charity to be an overreach of federal powers and responsibilities (Hall, 2006).

The Civil War also led to conflicts over approaches to social welfare, epitomized in the conflict between the U.S. Sanitary Commission and the Christian Commission. The Sanitary Commission formed a national federation of humanitarian responses to wartime public health concerns, promoting a secular position that focused on efficiency, driven by professionalized work, bureaucratic organization, and scientific rationality (Ginzberg, 1990; Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020).[9] Following the war, the Sanitary Commission facilitated development of broader public health and social welfare initiatives that sought to address causes rather than alleviate symptoms (Hall, 2006; Katz, 1996). Women were involved heavily in these efforts (Ginzberg, 1990; Hall, 2006). The Sanitary Commission sought to distance itself from traditional charitable notions of "religious feeling, localism, and sentimentalism," which its rival, the Christian Commission, espoused (Ginzberg, 1990, p. 159). The Christian Commission represented traditional, evangelical values and sought to build a grassroots network of volunteers through church congregations (Ginzberg, 1990). It promoted provinciality, encouraging donations to be earmarked for specific military units (Soskis, 2020). The Christian Commission valued spirituality and alleviating individual suffering over efficiency and effectiveness (Hall, 2006). It claimed that its volunteers "were more pure of heart" than the Sanitary Commission's paid staff members, who represented "partisan, political views" (Ginzberg, 1990, p. 162). These two organizations continued to compete for public support as they became involved in post-war

[9] Philanthropic relief drove the majority of the Sanitary Commission's devoted national constituency, but the organization's board also pursued "scientific work" that sought to measure Black bodies to "prove" racial hierarchies in ways that ultimately contributed to scientific racism (Schwalm, 2023, p. 57).

social welfare (Ginzberg, 1990; Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020), and points of contention between the two continue to permeate the orientations of contemporary social welfare organizations and food banks.

Following the failure of post-war Reconstruction, racism and xenophobia continued to encourage the expansion of voluntary associations and charitable organizations (Hall, 2006). Marginalized groups created organizations to provide social opportunities and security that was unavailable publicly, while native-born, white Protestants sought to maintain power through discriminatory gatekeeping in their own organizations (Hall, 2006). Racial and ethnic divides contributed to ideals that the “American way” involved communities “taking care of their own” (Poppendieck, 2014a, p. 21).

In 1879, anti-immigrant Protestant groups, informed by social Darwinism, advanced a new approach to address poverty called the Charity Organization Movement (Hall, 2006; Poppendieck, 2014a). The movement built on the Sanitary Commission to bring greater efficiency and rationality to their work by cutting down on indiscriminate assistance (Soskis, 2020). Proponents argued for cutting all forms of public relief so that constituents’ support would not be swayed by public assistance (Hall, 2006). They sought to create greater efficiency by eliminating claims from those considered undeserving, and they registered, tracked, and closely supervised applicants to enforce morals, and created work requirements for assistance (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Such paternalistic practices were the foundation of the social casework approach, which would later become widespread as social work professionalized and grew along with the field of psychology (Poppendieck, 2014a). Poverty was considered to be a moral failing that reflected sinfulness and other individualized problems (Cassiman, 2007). Charity workers sought to separate children from parents “in the hope of saving them from the

contagion of Pauperism" (Cassiman, 2007, p. 54). Such logics persist in "culture of poverty" narratives (Katz, 2013, p. 12). The Salvation Army is an example of an organization whose roots are in a "militant, moralistic approach" that developed as part of this movement, originating from evangelical England and spreading through the United States at the end of the 1800s (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020, p. 39).

In 1893, an economic depression forced many middle-class people to turn to public and private assistance (Soskis, 2020). "The jarring sight of respectable citizens in bread lines" led scientific charity leaders to rethink their views of poverty as a state of dependency and moral failing (Soskis, 2020, p. 40). Instead, the public focus "shifted toward structural causes of poverty and to seek related legislative reforms" (Soskis, 2020, p. 40). This shift was brought on by crisis, which required the middle class to reevaluate assumptions regarding poverty because people in their own class needed assistance. This shift aligns with contemporary sociological understandings of the structural causes of poverty. Despite this turn in public opinion, religious organizations such as the Salvation Army continued to expand their moralized ministries that served the poor following the economic crisis, but new approaches also prospered (Hall, 2006).

Jane Addams and a group comprised predominately of women brought the British settlement house model to the United States to address urban poverty during the late 1880s (Hall, 2006; Skocpol, 1992). The most famous of these settlement houses is Hull House, founded in Chicago in 1889 by Addams (S. R. Smith & Lipsky, 2009). The settlement house movement sought to bring well-educated, affluent people together with people in poverty (Skocpol, 1992). Those well-off were meant to benefit from opportunities to study urban conditions, while poor and working-class residents of the community received education and social services (Skocpol, 1992). Settlement houses like Hull House relied on local, private funding to offer a range of

programming that drew on both self-sufficiency and collective organizing to change the structural conditions that impacted people in poverty (Desmond & Western, 2018; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Skocpol, 1992; S. R. Smith & Lipsky, 2009). Addams advanced the social scientific study of poverty, contributing to both social work and sociology (Cassiman, 2007; Desmond & Western, 2018; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). Addams (2021, p. 80) recognized the important experiential knowledge of people in poverty, stating, “No one so poignantly realizes the failures in the social structure as the man at the bottom, who has been most directly in contact with those failures and has suffered most.” The settlement movement is nevertheless critiqued for its general exclusion of racial minorities and continuing paternalistic teachings of middle-class values (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). During the early 1900s, Hull House received private foundation funding from the Carnegie, Russell Sage, and Rockefeller foundations to study conditions of urban poverty (Kohl-Arenas, 2015). However, philanthropic foundations refused to fund the movement’s work, which focused on labor organizing and other efforts that threatened the industrial capitalism that led to their wealth accumulation (Kohl-Arenas, 2015). As settlement houses professionalized during the 1920s, they reduced advocacy for structural change (Carson, 1990; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012).

At the turn of the century, massive accumulation of wealth by economic elites began to change charity, creating a basis for American philanthropy (Soskis, 2020). During the early 1900s, 8% of U.S. households controlled 75% of property (Soskis, 2020, p. 41). The share of wealth controlled by the top 10% began to decline during the 1930s (Saez & Zucman, 2016).[10] In

[10] The economic elite, particularly the top 1%, have been accumulating increasing shares of wealth since the late 1970s, leading to similar conditions in the present (Saez & Zucman, 2016)

an 1889 essay, Andrew Carnegie, who profited from union busting in industrial capitalism, promoted a secular "social Darwinist framework" to manage vast inequality through "stewardship" (Soskis, 2020, p. 41). He criticized traditional charity for encouraging undesirable behavior among people who were "unworthy" (Hall, 2006, p. 46). Rather than reducing inequality through wealth redistribution, Carnegie sought to provide opportunities for people to climb the ladder themselves, using the promise that people could pull themselves out of poverty to legitimize the existence of extreme wealth (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Carnegie encouraged other millionaires to join him in his philanthropy, arguing that they should steward their wealth themselves to direct it to causes that upheld the social order while avoiding forced redistribution through taxation (Hall, 2006; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Soskis, 2020).

During the late 1800s, unionized labor and the public were dissatisfied with the robber barons' efforts to avoid taxation in their new form of philanthropy (Hall, 2006). Populist groups advocated for greater taxation and government control of essential infrastructures (Hall, 2006). Despite such opposition, the elite changed New York State's policy in 1893 and were able to secure charters for the first grant-making foundations during the early 1900s (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). These early foundations contributed to education, medical and social research, and social service provision (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Rockefeller, the wealthiest American, sought to engage in scientific philanthropy through intermediary organizations to address root causes, instead of alleviation (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). The public and U.S. government remained skeptical of elite philanthropists' power and advancement of their own public policy agendas to the detriment of the federal government (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Many foundations sought to avoid questions of legitimacy by focusing on noncontroversial activities (e.g., healthcare and

education) and granting funds to intermediary organizations that sought to influence public policy (Hall, 2006).

During the early 20th century, mass philanthropy arose in response to elite philanthropy (Soskis, 2020). In 1913, the first Community Chest was established in Cleveland, Ohio by local chamber of commerce members who were trying to increase efficiency in fundraising from the masses by coordinating across multiple causes, a practice developed by Jewish charities in Boston (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020; United Way of Tompkins County, n.d.). They also sought to align charitable agendas with business interests (Hall, 2006). Community Chests, now known as the United Way, spread throughout the country, growing to a network of 39 organizations by 1919 and more than 1000 by 1948 (United Way of Tompkins County, n.d.). The first community foundation was established in Cleveland in 1914, after local leaders learned that the top 1% contributed more than 96% of funding for social welfare organizations (Soskis, 2020, p. 44). Proponents spread the organizational form across the country, espousing community foundations as a countermeasure to elite philanthropy and presenting “charitable giving as a democratic entitlement” (Soskis, 2020, p. 45). Since Protestants largely controlled these organizations, Catholic and Jewish groups created their own parallel organizations—Catholic Charities and the United Jewish Appeal (Hall, 2006).

World War I promoted the expansion of national organizations and mass philanthropy as Americans united in response to humanitarian needs in Europe and U.S. wartime needs (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). During the war, social work as a discipline professionalized, focusing on medicalization and anti-dependency as tenets. Jane Addams and her structural focus were shunned due to her anti-war position (Cassiman, 2007). Herbert Hoover gained public acclaim as a humanitarian after he established the American Commission for Relief in Belgium in 1914

(Soskis, 2020). In his 1922 book, *American Individualism*, Hoover advocated for what is now known as the associative state, which was driven by tight networks of voluntary associations that partnered with the government to promote social welfare (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). Hoover's vision called for private organizations to lead social welfare provisioning, outlining a smaller role for the federal government (Soskis, 2020). Hoover served as Secretary of Commerce under both Harding and Coolidge from 1921 to 1928 (Hall, 2006), during which he promoted public-private partnerships to promote the morally upheld idea of home ownership (Hall, 2006). Hoover's associative state expanded voluntary associations at the local and national levels, aligning them with a civic mindset and supporting the expansion of organizations such as trade associations, Rotary Clubs, the Boy Scouts, and professional societies (Hall, 2006). Hoover was elected president in 1928, and although American civic values persisted, the onset of the Great Depression at the beginning of his presidency eroded public support for the associational state (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020).

1929 to 1980

The economic shock to middle-class households caused by the Great Depression led the American public to change its outlook regarding the role charitable organizations should play in society, and in especial how to best address poverty. Despite rapid growth, U.S. voluntary organizations remained both geographically uneven and unable to adequately address poverty, even before the onset of the Great Depression (Poppendieck, 2014a). The Great Depression brought this home as voluntary organizations could not contend with the problem of poverty in America (Poppendieck, 2014a). Despite many requests for federal support from both the public and social welfare organization leaders, Hoover refused to help (Soskis, 2020), claiming that feeding people in poverty was the responsibility of voluntary organizations rather than the

federal government (Hoover, 1931; Kotz, 1969; Soskis, 2020). Hoover adopted an "optimistic" approach, suggesting that the Great Depression was not as bad as people thought and would end soon (Poppendieck, 2014a).

During the early years of the Depression, the social service agencies that Hoover refused to fund struggled; one-third of charitable agencies closed due to lack of funding while Hoover was in office (Soskis, 2020). As demand for assistance grew, agencies changed their operations in an attempt to serve many more people (Poppendieck, 2014a). Community Chests cut recreational and counseling programs, and casework-based agencies found that they no longer had time to supervise their growing client lists (Poppendieck, 2014a). Agencies shifted from cash-based approaches to providing assistance in-kind in the form of groceries and used items (Poppendieck, 2014a). They sought to leverage their meager funds through wholesale food purchasing, which they distributed through commissaries, despite critiques of recipients' stigmatization and the impact on local food retailers (Poppendieck, 2014a). These experiences led settlement house social workers to critique systems of in-kind aid provision (Poppendieck, 2014a).

As needs became increasingly salient, new groups began to distribute food assistance, including Al Capone's Breadline and Princeton's Eating Clubs, distributing table leftovers (Poppendieck, 2014a). Established charities critiqued these efforts as deterring support because people falsely assumed that needs were being met through many visible relief efforts (Poppendieck, 2014a). As the suffering continued, people took collective action, forming mutual aid groups and storming welfare offices and businesses (Poppendieck, 2014a). Despite widespread hunger during the Depression and the impacts of the Dust Bowl on farming, the United States had food surpluses, demonstrating the contemporary American paradox of hunger

amidst plenty (Poppendieck, 2014a). Despite political pressures, Hoover continued to refuse to allow the federal government to help feed Americans (Poppendieck, 2014a). He maintained a policy of "official optimism" which ultimately reflected negligence given the severity of the Depression (Poppendieck, 2014a, p. 22). Hoover proclaimed:

> This is not an issue as to whether people shall go hungry or cold in the United States. It is solely a question of the best method by which hunger and cold shall be prevented. It is a question as to whether the American people on one hand will maintain the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government as distinguished on the other hand from appropriations out of the Federal Treasury for such purposes. My own conviction is strongly that if we break down this sense of responsibility of individual generosity to individual and mutual self-help in the country in times of national difficulty and if we start appropriations of this character we have not only impaired something infinitely valuable in the life of the American people but have struck at the roots of self-government. (Hoover, 1931)

Hoover stated that the federal government should assist only if voluntary organizations and local and state governments "are unable to find resources with which to prevent hunger and suffering," but he also claimed, "I have the faith in the American people that such a day will not come" (Hoover, 1931). However, severe deprivation was well-documented across the country (Poppendieck, 2014a). A study conducted in 1931 found that 238 people were admitted to New York City hospitals who were diagnosed with starvation or malnutrition, and 44 of them died (Poppendieck, 2014a). Hunger and suffering were clearly present in the United States, and yet Hoover remained adamant that no one in the U.S. was experiencing hunger or homelessness. On 6 November 1932, just two days before the presidential election, President Hoover declared, "I do not know of a single place where people are being deprived of food or shelter" (Hoover, 1932; Poppendieck, 2014a). Hoover's failure to respond effectively to the Great Depression led him to be discredited, and Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933 as a result (Hall, 2006).

Prior to Roosevelt, the federal government distanced itself from responsibility for people in poverty (Kotz, 1969). When Roosevelt took office in the middle of the Great Depression, he rapidly rolled out several new federal policies that would form what is known as the New Deal, leading to dramatic expansion of the federal government's role in securing social welfare and creating many policies and policy positions that persist to this day (Hall, 2006; Poppendieck, 2014a). The New Deal ushered a new era of public spending on social welfare, including Social Security, unemployment insurance, and food stamps, and it revived public cash welfare spending for children (Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hall, 2006).

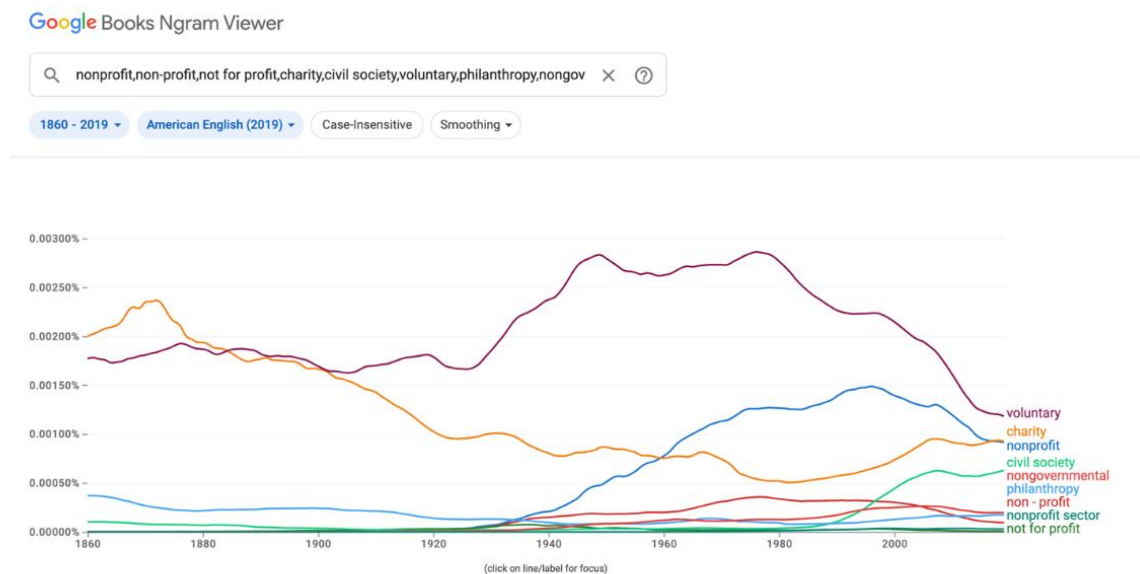
However, it also strengthened voluntary associations by supporting organized labor, forming new public-private partnerships, and funding infrastructure to support both public and private organizations (Hall, 2006). During the 1950s and 1960s, social welfare organizations began to change their services to complement federal programs, offering therapeutic and counseling services that drew on the professionalization of social workers while public programs provided material assistance (Morris, 2004; Soskis, 2020). The New Deal established a tradition of farmers' weighing in on agricultural policies through farm associations (Poppendieck, 2014a). Roosevelt's tax reforms encouraged charity by allowing corporations to take deductions for charitable donations and increasing progressive taxation on wealthy individuals, which spurred their own donations (Hall, 2006).

After WWII, the state expanded its role, but the period was conducive to growth in the number and power of private nonprofit organizations (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). The 1943 enactment of universal income taxation expanded the government's income and public finance (Hall, 2006). Private social service organizations proliferated as they received support to administer government-funded services, and associations sought greater influence on the

government in its more involved role (Hall, 2006). Increased taxes spurred creation of many new foundations, as the wealthy sought to avoid taxation (Soskis, 2020). Foundations began to work closely with the federal government, as people rotated through positions on foundations and high-level government offices (Soskis, 2020). Concerns over tax loopholes and increasing power of private organizations led to an overhaul of the tax code (Hall, 2006).

Figure 2.1

Google Ngram of Nonprofit and Related Terms in American English Books 1860–2019.



Note. The start year was chosen as a meaningful time distinction (Hall, 2006).

The 1954 Internal Revenue Code created categories of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, including 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) (Hall, 2006). Under the new code, a variety of organizations, including voluntary associations, social service organizations, foundations, charitable trusts, cooperatives, unions, clubs, and credit unions, were grouped into the single category “tax-exempt nonprofits” (Hall, 2006; Internal Revenue Code of 1954, 1954).

Registrations of charitable organizations boomed from 1939 to 1980, growing from 12,500 to 320,000 (Hall, 2006). Changes to common terminology related to nonprofits are evidenced using Google's nGram viewer on the relative commonality of nonprofit-related terms in books written in American English. Figure 2.1 shows how "voluntary" and "charity" were common terms until "nonprofit" bypassed "charity" in about 1960. During the 1950s and 1960s, nonprofits became known as comprising a cohesive and powerful sector (Hall, 2006).

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared "War on Poverty" in 1964, less than two months after Kennedy's assassination (Katz, 2013). The War on Poverty brought about more programs that targeted poor families than any other point in U.S. history (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Its programs levied critiques at the shortcomings of public policy responses and existing voluntary sector approaches, rooted in therapeutic, professionalized social work (Katz, 2013; Morris, 2004). The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act established funds to be developed by Community Action Agencies, ushering another increase to nonprofits (Katz, 2013). The War on Poverty funded a broad range of nonprofit organizations, including organizations rooted in the Charity Organization Movement, settlement houses, and Community Action Agencies (Morris, 2004). Ultimately, much of the federal government's social safety net was administered by nonprofits and both state and local governments (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020). During the 1960s, legislative changes allowed the federal government to contract social services provision to nonprofit organizations, which greatly expanded public funding of nonprofits (Soskis, 2020). Social welfare spending expanded, with much of it targeting the middle class rather than benefiting the poorest Americans (Soskis, 2020). Nonprofits continued to grow, with the 1970s being especially conducive to growth of conservative nonprofits, such as the Heritage Foundation, which bolstered conservative politics in subsequent years (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020).

1980 to Early 2000s

Ronald Reagan's election campaign popularized the racialized trope of the "welfare queen," increasing public discontent for public welfare programs (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). When Reagan was elected in 1980, he advanced the idea that the government should reduce the involvement it had taken since the New Deal, and instead create space for religious nonprofits to flourish, echoing Hoover (Soskis, 2020). However, the approach overlooked the extensive role of federal government funding for nonprofits, comprising one-third to three-quarters of organizational revenue across nonprofit sectors (Hall, 2006). Conservative ideals of the time again changed the dominant approach to addressing poverty, shifting attention from structural social and economic conditions to a return to individual behaviors and values (Hall, 2006). Federal nonprofit spending largely avoided being cut, and the number of nonprofit organizations continued to grow while Reagan was in office (Soskis, 2020). However, looking at all nonprofits obscures how Reagan's policies significantly cut funding to organizations that primarily provided social services to people in poverty (Soskis, 2020). To compensate for lost federal support, nonprofit organizations turned to revenue-generating programs, which were common prior to the New Deal (Soskis, 2020). The nonprofit sector continued to commercialize, integrating market-oriented approaches throughout (Soskis, 2020).

President Clinton passed the welfare overhaul that Reagan had not been able to do through The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). These reforms decimated the cash social safety net and shifted the dominant approach to poverty to a conservative, individualistic approach that encouraged people to pull themselves out of poverty by removing them from welfare rolls and into low-wage work (Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003; Katz, 2013). Welfare

reform and the George W. Bush administration also included provisions to strengthen connections between publicly funded social services and religious organizations (Soskis, 2020). Such provisions appealed to evangelicals, but little changed because the federal government already funded religious nonprofit organizations (Hall, 2006; Soskis, 2020).

During the 21st century, existing nonprofit trends continued. The number of nonprofit organizations continued to grow, reaching 1.5 million by 2015, and they continued to advance market-centered approaches as the line between for-profit and nonprofit endeavors increasingly blurred (Soskis, 2020). Public-private partnerships between government and nonprofits also continued to flourish (Soskis, 2020). Growing wealth inequality and the consolidation of fortunes among the top 1% increased the role of foundations, many of which are now driven by technology fortunes (Soskis, 2020).

U.S. nonprofits have been shaped by people in power and historical events, particularly economic crises. Throughout U.S. history, religious morals greatly influenced charitable approaches, particularly those that addressed poverty. The U.S. public, and along with it, charitable organizations, oscillated between understanding poverty as the fault of individual decisions and conceiving poverty as a structural outcome of political and economic factors. Nonprofits have historically been used as a vessel to consolidate power of the elite, but they have also been a powerful force of resistance for historically marginalized groups. By outlining this context, I provide a historical background to understanding contemporary private food assistance organizations, particularly as they responded to the economic crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The "Garbage Can" and Social Safety Net Provision

Food banks' organizational model was designed in response to food waste, which continues to impact their structures and practices. Lohnes (2023, p. 2) argues that we should

question whether "the idea that feeding the hungry with industrial food waste is an unquestionable moral imperative," or instead a "political strategy promoted by powerful interests in the profit-driven food system." Warshawsky (2023) argues that governments and corporations continually espouse food banks as solutions to food waste and hunger, despite a lack of evidence of their efficacy, as food banks help them avoid their own shortcomings. For these reasons, food banks expose organizational contradictions between their original purpose and their present role in U.S. society. I draw on theories of organizational decision-making to assess how the current U.S. food assistance system developed, noting that it did so without people who are experiencing hunger as the center point.

The assumption that rational decision-making guided the development of food banks to solve hunger must be abandoned if one is to understand food assistance in the United States. Rationality during decision-making assumes that people make decisions linearly by evaluating possible choices and then further evaluating the consequences of each choice to select the best one (March & Simon, 1958). However, organizational decision-making does not follow a rational choice model, since it requires infeasible amounts of knowledge about all possible choices and their consequences (March & Simon, 1958). Rational choice assumes that a problem is identified and a decision is made to identify the best possible solution. To explain how decisions are made, Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) argue that organizational decisions are frequently made using a reverse of this process, which they call the *garbage can model*—taken to mean that all options are thrown into the can in an ad-hoc fashion to rationalize decisions after an event. The model suggests that decision-making deviates from rational choice in that solutions are determined before a problem is identified, reversing the temporal order of decision-making (Cohen et al., 1972, 2012). They argue that such irrational decision-making is most prevalent in

organizations having inconsistent and ambiguous preferences, operating through processes that members do not understand well, and in which members' time allocations vary across domains (Cohen et al., 1972). Cohen et al. (1972) discusses universities as prime examples of organizations that meet these conditions, but more recent research also suggests that policymaking (Levinthal, 2012; Olsen, 2001) and the formation of voluntary organizations and their responses (Burke et al., 2023; Lomi et al., 2012) evidence the garbage can model of decision-making, too.

While developing the garbage can model, Cohen et al. (1972) used the case of the university to argue that organizational decision-making is not necessarily rational and linear. Their model challenges linear rational choice decision-making models that posit people identify a problem, find and evaluate possible solutions to it, and choose the best solution (Cohen et al., 1972). They instead suggest that "an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might answer, and decision makers looking for work" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2). They argue that participants, problems, choices, and solutions are milling about and can connect to each other in any order (Cohen et al., 1972, 2012). Decisions are influenced greatly by the assortment of people, and each person's own goals and feelings, present in a decision-making space (Cohen et al., 2012). They develop a metaphor of the garbage can, suggesting choices are made as participants throw multiple problems and solutions into a garbage can and then match solutions and problems that are in the can at the same time and that align with decision-makers' goals and values (Cohen et al., 1972, 2012).

I argue, in line with Cohen, March, and Olsen's Organizational Garbage Can thesis, that food banks and public social safety net programs were solutions looking for problems, such as

hunger and poverty. As such, decision-making, and resulting solutions, will not reflect linear decision-making, during which problems of hunger and poverty would have been identified, potential solutions developed, and best solutions chosen. Instead, food banks and food assistance programs were food production-based solutions that were first identified and then subsequently matched to the problems of hunger and poverty in the U.S. Understanding food assistance programs as solutions that have found a problem exposes a primary reason why food banking continues to struggle to address hunger and poverty. The garbage can model of decision-making helps explain why redistributing food waste to people who are experiencing poverty is viewed as a viable solution in the U.S. This contrasts with northern Europe, for example, where food banks are not framed as addressing poverty, but as environmental organizations whose primary function is to reduce food waste (Warshawsky, 2023). Yet, justifications for food banking as an anti-hunger rationale persist even in the face of a lack of evidence that food banks reduce food insecurity (Warshawsky, 2023).

After developing my argument that both government food assistance programs and food banks reflect solutions that found problems, I explore the organizational forms of food banks in greater depth. I specifically examine how moral conceptions of poverty are embedded in food banking approaches, positing that these moral conceptions reflect what Cohen et al. (1972, p. 2) refer to as "issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired." Decision-makers brought various moral conceptions of poverty to decision-making, leading to three moral approaches to poverty—traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change. The garbage can model explains how contrasting moral approaches appear ad hoc, varying not just between but within organizations.

Government Food Assistance Programs: Farm Subsidy or a Solution to Hunger?

Since the United States' public safety net relies heavily on in-kind food, in comparison to other wealthy countries that provide greater cash support (Poppendieck, 2014b), I explore public in-kind food programs in greater depth. The largest public food assistance programs in the United States originated as agricultural subsidies to address surpluses, found in the Food Stamp Program (now SNAP), TEFAP, and more recent programs such as The Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA). Such programs began as solutions to agricultural surpluses and farm income precarity, relying on the government purchasing large amounts of food. These solutions then went looking for a problem, targeting poverty and food insecurity. During the past three decades, the United States has increasingly implemented in-kind assistance instead of cash assistance for the poorest Americans, despite research suggesting that cash assistance is associated with decreasing food insecurity (Danziger, 2010; Shaefer et al., 2020). I draw from extant research to trace how food assistance programs were initially solutions to food waste in the corporate agricultural sector that were subsequently paired with the problem of hunger. Using organizational theory, I show how and why this approach to addressing human needs, like hunger, weakens the social safety net.

The Food Stamp Program/SNAP

What was initially called the Food Stamps Program is now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Food stamps are an example of what Zelizer (1997, p. 11) calls "earmarked money." Food stamps are imbued with moral meanings that arise from ways poverty has historically been viewed in the United States (Zelizer, 1997). The provision of in-kind aid in was not always the norm. During the first two decades of the 20th century, social

workers and relief organizations viewed cash as the best way to distribute money to people who were experiencing poverty to promote competent spending habits and dignity (Zelizer, 1997). Despite this, social workers and relief organizations continued to earmark and manage money through extensive budgeting and bookkeeping requirements as they sought to incorporate cash into "a rational, educational program" (Zelizer, 1997, p. 155). During the Great Depression, the government drew lines between universal benefits like unearmarked Social Security payments and public means-tested programs (like food stamps) for people who were experiencing poverty, which were subject to greater earmarking and less dignity (Zelizer, 1997).[11] Food stamps arose as one of these earmarked currencies, designed to be used by people in poverty, particularly those viewed as undeserving (Zelizer, 1997).

During the Depression, the federal government started a new program of agricultural price supports to mitigate the effects of market volatility on farmers (Daponte & Bade, 2006). President Hoover denied the existence and extent of hunger and suffering in the United States during the Depression and thus refused to redistribute surplus food to the poor (Kotz, 1969; Poppendieck, 2014a). Soon after, the Roosevelt Administration sought to redistribute these commodities to the needy through relief agencies, but food retailers objected to being left out of the solution (Daponte & Bade, 2006). Food retailers "feared that poor people might be able to satisfy all their needs" outside of traditional food markets and spend their money on other necessities (Maney, 1989, p. 15). In May 1939, the experimental Food Stamps program was rolled out, allowing participants to buy orange stamps, exchangeable for regular food items, at

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[11] *Universal* programs allow all citizens (or a broad swath of the population) to access them. On the other hand, *means-tested* programs are only available upon proof of qualification, typically by proving that one has income below a specific threshold.

face value and receive blue stamps, exchangeable for federally determined surplus foods, worth half the value of purchased orange stamps (Daponte & Bade, 2006). This two-color system formally dictated the earmarking of food stamps (Zelizer, 1997). In 1943, the program ended because World War II competed for the demand of government food, which mean the government no longer held food surpluses (Daponte & Bade, 2006). However, the war also brought attention to malnutrition as an issue of national security, which led to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) being passed in 1946 (Daponte & Bade, 2006).

Kennedy's presidential election campaign heavily discussed food assistance initiatives (Maney, 1989). His farm advisors viewed food assistance as important policies that could have multiple benefits. Maney (1989, p. 24) characterized their consideration and prioritization of these benefits, stating, "Expanded food aid would stimulate greater food consumption and bolster farm income. Social welfare and other humanitarian considerations came second." Kennedy's campaign emphasized food assistance, and he prioritized it when he took office. His first official act as president was to expand USDA commodity surplus programs (Berry, 1984; Maney, 1989). Kennedy resurrected the Food Stamps Program in 1961, with substantial changes to the program (Daponte & Bade, 2006). Kennedy's support for reviving the program was bolstered by congressional support from legislators, such as Senator Aiken (Maney, 1989). Aiken characterized farm surpluses as a result of consumer underconsumption instead of agricultural overproduction, arguing that "Underfed people and underpaid farmers in a nation which is presently enjoying unprecedented prosperity" was an important social problem (Congress, 1959,

p. 905). The two-color stamp system ended, and purchases were no longer limited to surplus commodities to benefit agricultural interests (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Kotz, 1969).[12]

Although food stamps still had to be purchased in a lump sum, fear of fraud led policymakers to decouple assistance from nutritional standards and add a nutrition education component, creating a purposefully insufficient social safety net (Berry, 1984; Daponte & Bade, 2006). According to Berry (1984, pp. 26–27) and Kotz (1969, p. 55), the USDA food stamp task force purposefully made the program nutritionally insufficient for the poorest families because they were afraid of potential fraud and scandal. Bureaucrats reasoned that:

> If the amount of stamps was too far in excess of what the family normally spent on food, there would be a great temptation for them to try to sell some of the stamps for cash on a newly created black market. (Berry, 1984, p. 26)

Fear of fraud led the program to be so conservative that it earned the moniker *Scrooge stamps* (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Kotz, 1969, p. 53). Maney (1989, p. 30) states that the program's insufficiencies arose from its designers being "used to responding to the problems of farmers, not those of low-income consumers" and failing to base the assistance amounts on empirical research. The Food Stamps Program was designed as if poorer households had lower nutritional requirements (Kotz, 1969). During a congressional hearing, Representative Albert Quie of Minnesota questioned Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman about the program's departure from nutritional standards.

> Mr. Quie: Under your table…what is considered a nutritional diet is much lower for the poorer people. Why is that? Why is it that for a poor person who has $100 a month or $50 a month, his nutritional needs are less than the person who gets, let us say, $150 or $200 a month?

[12] The USDA did not compare benefits between commodity programs and food stamp programs empirically, though USDA bureaucrats made policy recommendations based on the assumption that the Food Stamp Program would further benefit agricultural interests in the long-run by increasing consumption of pricier food items (Maney, 1989).

> Secretary Freeman: His nutritional needs I expect are probably the same. Medical authority would so certify. His food habits, however, are sharply different usually. If you jumped from $50 a month for food in x family to $100 a month—this was done overnight—the strong likelihood based on our experience and that under the earlier food stamp act is that a significant number of those stamps would be bootlegged. (U.S. House, 1968, p. 156)

Across several lines of questioning from multiple representatives, Freeman argued that poorer families were accustomed to eating less than other families, so they were more likely to "bootleg" food stamps if provided with a nutritionally adequate amount (Kotz, 1969, p. 55; U.S. House, 1968, pp. 100, 138, 156). The poorest households were, therefore, deliberately given insufficient assistance based on fears of fraud (Berry, 1984; U.S. House, 1968). Freeman acknowledged that he believed people would "bootleg" their food assistance because they were experiencing poverty, which meant they needed clothes, rent, and money more broadly, rather than just food (U.S. House, 1968, p. 100). This illustrates how the Food Stamp Program was designed; it was not meant to meet the needs of people in poverty.

USDA officials further prioritized farmers' interests over the needs of people in poverty by continuing to charge for food stamps with the intention that families would be unable to reduce food expenditures (Berry, 1984). This was supposed to benefit farmers by increasing the amount of food consumed while maintaining consumers' costs (Berry, 1984). USDA officials believed that the requirement of purchasing stamps was important to making food stamps a "self-help" program (Berry, 1984, p. 30).

In 1964, the new Food Stamps Program was signed into law by President Johnson, who espoused the program's benefits for agriculture and people in poverty (Berry, 1984). Johnson stated, "I believe the Food Stamp Act weds the best of the humanitarian instincts of the American people with the best of the free enterprise system" (Johnson, 1964). The Act made the

program available nationwide, but counties could opt between administering the Food Stamps Program or operating a direct commodity distribution program (Daponte & Bade, 2006). During the late 1960s, the USDA's food assistance programs, including food stamps, continued to prioritize agricultural interests over meeting the needs of people in poverty (Kotz, 1969, p. 45). As commodity availability declined during the 1970s, the program was reformed to have national eligibility standards, income-adjusted price caps on the prices of food stamps, and annual inflation adjustments on food stamp allotments (Daponte & Bade, 2006). In 1977, the purchasing requirement was abolished, and the value of the stamps was correspondingly reduced (Daponte & Bade, 2006). Policymakers purposely kept the value of food stamps insufficient, motivated by moral ideas of deservingness and fear of fraud (Daponte & Bade, 2006).

The Food Stamps Program originated as an agricultural subsidy. It changed over the years to benefit retailers more than farmers, but the program still does not effectively end food insecurity. This is unsurprising considering the reasons the program was created. Decisions were mainly driven by a desire to benefit farmers and retailers and moral ideas of deservingness coupled with unfounded fears that recipients would game the system and engage in fraud. Fears of fraud have since been popularized through the racialized and gendered trope of the welfare queen (Ray et al., 2023). The insufficiency of food stamps lead food-insecure people to seek other food assistance programs, including turning to private, nonprofit food assistance networks (Daponte & Bade, 2006).

The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

In response to Reagan's cuts to food stamps, attention shifted to the role that the private nonprofit network could play in anti-hunger efforts (Daponte & Bade, 2006). During the recession of the early 1980s, news broke that the federal government had stockpiled more than a

billion pounds of dairy products and was spending more than $36 million annually to store them (Poppendieck, 1998). Just before Christmas, Reagan authorized the release of 30 million pounds of cheese from the government's supply, which established the foundation for redistributing government surplus to nonprofit organizations (Poppendieck, 1998). Government cheese is well-remembered, but few are aware that the government continues distributing surplus commodities through the private food assistance network (Poppendieck, 1998).

Daponte and Bade (2006, p. 676) argue that the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1982, which led to redistribution of federal surplus commodities to social services nonprofit organizations, "can be considered the origin of the private food assistance network." The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) was established in 1983, seeking to temporarily extend redistributions of already-owned surplus food (Daponte & Bade, 2006). The formalization of the program also came with a mandate of eligibility requirements in response to fears that people who were not poor were obtaining surplus food (Lipsky & Thibodeau, 1988). Initially, the program only redistributed existing surpluses, since no funding was allocated to food purchasing (Daponte & Bade, 2006). In 1989, the program began to purchase food and distribute money to private nonprofit agencies for administrative expenses (Daponte & Bade, 2006). In 1990, the program was renamed from the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program to just The Emergency Food Assistance Program, keeping the same acronym, TEFAP, as the program was further institutionalized (Poppendieck, 1998).

TEFAP's emphasis on the solution of redistributing excess food rather than solving the problem of hunger is evident in both the history and design of the program. TEFAP clearly originated from agricultural surplus, but it is unique compared to other federal nutrition programs in that it does not have a nutritional goal or target population (Lipsky & Thibodeau, 1988).

TEFAP changed from “a supply-driven surplus distribution program to a product-rationed, participant-restricted, quasi-welfare program” as supplies shifted and eligibility restrictions were added (Lipsky & Thibodeau, 1988, pp. 235–236). Thus, the original “solution” of distributing excess commodities was maintained while the program was rebranded as a means-tested social safety net program.

TEFAP, along with Feeding America, was a driving force behind the institutionalization of food banks in the United States (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lipsky & Thibodeau, 1988). The program directs a large stream of in-kind and monetary resources to private nonprofit organizations. As of 2022, TEFAP was a nearly billion-dollar program; TEFAP’s purchasing budget was $399.74 million, and $500 million of supplemental TEFAP money was available through the Build Back Better Initiative (Castro, 2022). This push toward private administration of social services leads communities’ access to depend on the local nonprofit infrastructure, creating inequity in access (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lipsky & Thibodeau, 1988). TEFAP’s resource distribution to the many faith-based organizations that comprise much of the private food assistance network was viewed as a further benefit to privatization by the first Bush administration (Daponte & Bade, 2006). TEFAP represents another example of the government finding the solution of agricultural surplus before deciding to match surplus food to the problem of hunger. Since TEFAP relies on private nonprofits to distribute services, in comparison to food stamp distribution through welfare offices and food retailers, it bolsters the role of food banks.

When the state delegates responsibilities to nonprofits, nonprofits become extensions of the state in program administration (Clemens, 2017). Food banks play this role because they are major distributors of federal commodity programs (e.g., TEFAP, CFAP, and LFPA), and many food banks coordinate client applications for the SNAP program.

The Trade Mitigation Program is a recent modification to TEFAP that demonstrates that the program prioritizes a solution for American farmers rather than the problem of hunger. In 2018, the Trump Administration initiated a new program within TEFAP to purchase food from farmers affected by China's trade tariffs (Gallion & McIntosh, 2020). The purchases led to a large influx of food at TEFAP-distributing food banks (Gallion & McIntosh, 2020). The Trade Mitigation Program was "aimed at assisting farmers suffering from damage due to unjustified trade retaliation by foreign nations" by investing over $2.6 billion in commodity foods (Lohnes, 2021; USDA Press, 2018, para. 1). The USDA framed this program as a two-part effort "to feed people in need and assist American farmers and ranchers" (USDA Press, 2020, para. 1). However, it clearly prioritized purchasing excess commodities and then justifying it by attaching it to the problem of hunger as it diverted surpluses to food banks to feed food insecure people. Food banks experienced issues since they were tasked with safely storing and redistributing large quantities of rapidly expiring food such as milk (Brown, 2019). The food was not processed and packaged in ways and quantities that prioritized consumption by the end user, and the food items were not chosen based on nutritional content (Brown, 2019). Some support was available for food bank infrastructure, but they were concerned about being able to absorb the increased costs of additional staff and maintenance after the program ended (Brown, 2019).

TEFAP and the Trade Mitigation Program were both supply-driven programs. The solution of redistributing commodities was only later attached to the problem of hunger, illustrating garbage can model decision-making in creating current food assistance structures. TEFAP played an important role in developing the system of food banks and other private food assistance providers found in the United States today. Still, these programs were agricultural subsidies that only later became solutions to hunger.

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP)

Under Trump, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) and its Farmers to Families Box Program were rolled out in 2020 (Lohnes, 2021). Through CFAP, the USDA purchased commodities from U.S. farmers and redistributed them through food banks. Before the program was announced in April 2020, Feeding America and the American Farm Bureau Federation had proposed a voucher program (Costanzo, 2020b). CFAP sought to enlist food distributors impacted by the closures of hotels and restaurants to source agricultural products and package them into family-sized cardboard boxes (USDA, 2021). The program distributed 173.7 million boxes of food over five rounds of distributions (USDA, 2021). The first wave allocated $19 billion in funding for purchasing food, and the second allocated an additional $13.21 billion (Peterson, 2020a, 2020b).

The program received mixed reviews from food banks, and it was critiqued for inefficiencies, costs to nonprofit providers, decentering client choice (i.e., clients' opportunities to select their own food), and politicizing food distribution (Bottemiller Evich, 2020; Charles, 2020; Costanzo, 2020b; Jaffe, 2022; Rasul, 2020). Some food banks appreciated the extra food and availability of produce (Jaffe, 2022). The government was critiqued for paying far above grocery store prices for the food and not enforcing its contractors to complete the work they agreed to do (Charles, 2020). Food banks then had to pay the costs of distributing the boxes (Charles, 2020; Rasul, 2020). The pre-packaged boxes failed to provide clients with choice and autonomy to meet their own needs (Costanzo, 2020b). These rigid program structures lacked dignity and assumed that clients are unencumbered and thus able to prepare and eat whatever food was offered (Haynes Stein, 2023), indicative of the programs' focus on agricultural subsidy

over people experiencing hunger. The CFAP program ended on 31 May 2021, under the Biden administration (USDA, 2021).

Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA)

During the Biden Administration, the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) was established through the Build Back Better initiative of the American Rescue Plan (USDA, 2022d). The program sought to replace and address some of the issues with the CFAP (Costanzo, 2022a). The nearly $900 million program's purpose was "to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency" (USDA, 2022b, para. 6, 2022d). The program specifically sought to support local, regional, and underserved producers by purchasing food products that would then be distributed to food banks, schools, and organizations that worked with underserved communities (USDA, 2022d). The program incorporated a broad array of local producers, defining local as within the state or 400 miles (USDA, 2022d). The program aims to prioritize underserved producers, but there are no requirements to purchase from socially disadvantaged producers (USDA, 2022c). Like other programs discussed, the LFPA was designed to support producers with economic development rather than address nutrition and food security (Costanzo, 2022a). The nearly billion-dollar program focuses on the solution rather than prioritizing the problem of hunger. Since the program focuses on local food producers, it further institutionalizes the charitable food system and food banks as connectors between local farmers and underserved communities, rather than create direct connections or more traditional market connections to which more affluent consumers have access.

Food Banks as a Solution in Search of a Problem

Next, I trace how the organizational legacy of food banks shaped food banking and its approach to feeding people who are experiencing hunger, particularly given their current focus on ending hunger and its root causes. The historical legacy of food banks, as organizations created and designed to deal with food waste from Big Agriculture, food manufacturers, retailers, and the USDA's agricultural surplus, continues to shape their approach to addressing hunger. Some food banks began to look for deeper systemic solutions to the problem of food insecurity and hunger, particularly as the pandemic challenged the food bank system. However, the desire to end hunger conflicts with the food banking industry's historical place in distributing the food waste of industrial producers. How food banks dealt with this tension shaped their missions, programs, and metrics of success.

The first food bank opened in 1967, and the food bank model spread and institutionalized during the 1970s and 1980s. During the late 1960s, a businessman named John Van Hengel relocated from Wisconsin to Arizona (Poppendieck, 1998). While volunteering at a local mission's dining hall, he began gleaning surplus produce from houses in Phoenix, built on old orchards as the city expanded (Poppendieck, 1998). He found that homeowners did not like to see wasted food, so he gleaned more produce with the help of the mission's clients, and they ended up gleaning more than the mission needed (Poppendieck, 1998). Van Hengel then began distributing the food to other organizations, but he found that sorting and delivering the food to other agencies was demanding (Poppendieck, 1998). Therefore, he worked with Father Ronald Colloty to establish St. Mary's Food Bank in a 5,000-square-foot space that had been a bakery (Poppendieck, 1998). Since 1967, food banking has grown to at least 370 food banks in the

United States and more than 1000 food banks outside of the country (Costanzo, 2020a; The Global FoodBanking Network, 2018).

Creation of the first food bank was supply- rather than need-driven. This foundational focus on the supply side of operations rather than the needs of the food insecure is often obscured by food banks themselves (Poppendieck, 1998).[13] This is reflected in the nation's largest food bank organization rebranding itself from Second Harvest to Feeding America without overhauling its organizational structure or programs (Feeding America, 2008). The first food bank might be what Poppendieck (1998, p. 110) calls an "accidental program," in that it was an innovative development that arose from supply-driven, pragmatic concerns and was established through dedicated effort rather than being planned. However, proliferation of food banks at the national level was planned. The first was deliberately replicated and scaled to the national level through creation of Second Harvest, with the aid of federal government intervention (Poppendieck, 1998).

By 1975, Van Hengel's food bank had garnered enough acclaim to attract the attention of a staff member at the federal government's Community Service Administration (CSA), the successor to the office that pursued the War on Poverty (Poppendieck, 1998). The CSA contacted St. Mary's and offered it an "*unsolicited* grant to teach people from other communities how to set up food banks" (Poppendieck 1998, p. 123, emphasis added). Poppendieck's interview with Van Hengel indicates that the grant was turned down because St. Mary's board

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[13] John Van Hengel is credited with starting the first food bank, but other people formed similar food banks, such as the Atlanta Community Food Bank, independently of Van Hengel's ideas (Poppendieck 1998). Other independent organizations also formed during the same period, which Poppendieck (1998) claims was an incubator for these ideas due to a combination of national concern for poverty, the federal government's Emergency Food and Medical Program that was part of the War on Poverty, the environmental movement, consumer interest in dating foods, and an increase to grocery store dumpsters.

did not want federal government involvement (Poppendieck, 1998). The following year, the CSA persisted and offered St. Mary's another grant, which it accepted (Poppendieck, 1998). St. Mary's used the $50,000 grant to create a new project, Second Harvest (Feeding America, 2018; Poppendieck, 1998). In an interview conducted by Poppendieck, a Second Harvest staffer said:

> The federal government, CSA, gets no credit in the established history of Second Harvest, for its role…. It was people at the Community Services Administration, now nameless, faceless, bureaucrats…who were the ones who persisted. They came back another year. They said, "If you don't do it, we're going to find somebody who will." And that's how Second Harvest was born. (Poppendieck, 1998, p. 124)

The CSA continued to support Feeding America with increased funding over the next five years, with CSA funding totaling more than $1.5 million, including a $400,000 "cushion to permit it to make the transition to private funding" that was "awarded an hour before the agency was disbanded in 1982" (Poppendieck, 1998, p. 125)

The federal government's roles in establishing Second Harvest and TEFAP were instrumental to institutionalizing private food assistance (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Poppendieck, 1998). This relationship can be understood as an example of food banks operating as the "fingers" of the state's hands (Clemens, 2017, p. 44). Privatization of state programs diminishes citizens' rights (Clemens, 2017). Food banks also provide politicians with a means to offload their responsibility of ensuring people are fed (Ronson & Caraher, 2016). In the case of food banks, the right to food is weakened because people must access federal programs through private nonprofits, which have no means of public recourse.

Food banks are central to a public-private, supply-driven regime that regulates surplus food in the global capitalist food system (Lohnes, 2021). During the early 1980s, Second Harvest began to benefit from the USDA's commodity distributions and subsequent TEFAP program, eventually becoming the program's primary distributor (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Feeding

America, 2018). Feeding America further lobbied for legislation that benefited its corporate donors (Lohnes, 2021). Legislation made corporate donations much easier, since the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996 provided standardized protections for corporate donors nationwide (Feeding America, 2018). Feeding America also lobbied for the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act (PATH Act), which, beginning in 2016, increased the cap on charitable contributions for food corporations by 50% and codified the value of donations (Lohnes, 2021). Under the legislation, food donations could be claimed at a uniform fair market value that does not decrease due to spoilage or expiration (Lohnes, 2021). Feeding America pushes food banks to accept corporate donations even if they are unwanted since donations keep corporations satisfied as they avoid paying landfill fees (Lohnes, 2021; Prendergast, 2017).

Food bank donations also serve as public relations vehicles for agricultural, food-industry, and non-food corporations (Fisher, 2017a; Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Riches, 2018). In conjunction with SNAP, food banks also provide corporate welfare to the food industry, which underpays its employees (Fisher, 2017a). These food assistance programs allow employers to pay wages below what Karl Marx calls the "wage minimum," which must account for the "price of the necessary means of subsistence" (Tucker, 1978, p. 206). Corporate administrators comprise much of food bank boards, wielding significant power in the industry (Fisher, 2017a).[14] Food bank programming is also driven by donor interests that focus on kids and the elderly (Bouek, 2018a). Children and adults over 65 have lower rates of hunger than the

[14] Corporate involvement in food banking spans multiple industries, including grocery/retail (e.g., Kroger, Walmart, and Target), financial services (e.g., Bank of America and Wells Fargo), insurance (e.g., Blue Cross and Nationwide), food service (e.g., Sodexo), and shipping (e.g., UPS), all of which have corporate employee representation at more than five food banks (Fisher, 2017a, p. 60).

national average (Rabbitt et al., 2023), demonstrating that this emphasis detracts from those with the greatest rates.

Feeding America still relies heavily on government programs and corporate interest. A significant portion of the 5.36 billion meals that Feeding America claims to have provided during 2020 were provided through federal programs (Feeding America, 2021b). This number includes the National Feeding America Organization's claim that it provided 232 million SNAP meals by referring people to the SNAP program (Feeding America, 2021b). Furthermore, one-third of the food that the National Feeding America Organization distributed came from federal commodity programs (Feeding America, 2021b). Feeding America and its network do play an important role in connecting people with federal food assistance, but these metrics underrepresent the role the government plays, suggesting that private charity responses are more robust than they are on their own.

Food bank responses have historically been, and continue to be, focused on the distribution of food in-kind, supplying food rather than monetary support. In contemporary society, which has an overabundance of food, food insecurity is predominantly the result of economic insecurity and poverty. Providing food in-kind does not address the underlying issues of poverty and financial insecurity effectively; it is instead a downstream intervention. This stopgap response to poverty and the limited social safety net arises from food banks' origins as centralized distributors for gleaning operations. Food banks' historical orientation toward gleaning, rescuing, and redistributing surplus food and food waste is evident in this logistics-based approach. The organizational form of food banking is based on collecting and redistributing food in-kind. Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO whom I interviewed described food banks as "logistics with a mission," characterizing them as supply chain operators

that focus on moving in-kind food products (Scott, 2021). This approach requires organizational resources to manage food donations and government-provided food. Food banks expend considerable time and resources collecting, sorting, storing, transporting, and redistributing this food so that it can be delivered to partner nonprofit agencies and the public.

Donated resources represent sacred assets in an industry with a scarcity mentality. Food bank administrators frequently discussed their responsibility to be good stewards of in-kind and monetary donations, highlighting their obligations to philanthropic donors. Food banks primarily rely on obtaining resources from federal commodity programs designed to be farm supports, and from corporate donations bolstered by tax incentives and public relations (Fisher, 2017a; Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Lindenbaum, 2016; Lohnes, 2021; Riches, 2018). These resources primarily provide food banks with in-kind food, limiting their ability to offer alternative solutions to hunger.

This approach became less predetermined during the Covid-19 pandemic, since food banks benefited from increased cash flows. Despite newfound financial assets, many food banks maintained the status quo, dedicating monetary resources to purchasing food to be distributed in-kind rather than examining other support models for people who were experiencing hunger. Still, some food banks spent these funds on new approaches to addressing the root causes of hunger. The pandemic represented an inflection point in food banking, during which many food bank administrators began to question components of the status quo of food banking. Some administrators created new programs that were no longer based on distributing food in-kind, and others turned to new ways to distribute in-kind food.

Food banks have also made other changes during the past two decades. In the 21st century, they increasingly focused on the nutritional content of the food they distribute, and they

implemented programs that focus on individualized solutions to hunger, such as job training and budgeting classes. In 2023, U.S. government agencies were still relying on food banks to address the environmental issue of food waste. The Draft National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics highlighted increased investment in the private food assistance system as a part of the national strategy for reducing food waste (EPA et al., 2023). During the past decade, especially during the pandemic, food banks increasingly focused on social justice advocacy and creating systemic change (see Chapter 4).

Ideological Approaches to Food Banking

From 62 in-depth interviews and archival records, I found that food bank orientations to addressing hunger reflect three ideological approaches—the traditional charity model, the personal responsibility model, and the systemic change model (Table 2.1). Under the traditional charity model, food banks seek to address hunger by providing people with food, without addressing why they are food insecure. Under the personal responsibility model, food banks focus on individualistic approaches to work, self-improvement, nutrition, and education as supposed means for people to pull themselves out of poverty. Under the systemic change model, food banks seek to influence the structural issues that create poverty by focusing on systemic inequities, political mobilization, and public policy solutions. Each approach reflects an underlying ideological account of poverty that represents ideal types. None of the food banks I investigated fit entirely into one of these models. Instead, they might emphasize one model during interviews while having aspects of others in their documentation and how they operate. From the history traced above, responses to poverty are often contradictory, so historical ties are also based on ideal types. Despite food bank models not aligning perfectly with practices, identifying these ideological positions on hunger is useful to understanding how food banking

developed and the extent to which a food bank and its missions, programs, and metrics cohere with ideological conceptions of food insecurity and poverty.

Table 2.1

Ideological Approaches to Food Banking

	Model		
	Traditional Charity	**Personal Responsibility**	**Systemic Change**
Aspects	Providing in-kind food for "emergency-use" or regularly; incorporates moral ideas of "deservingness" regarding where to focus charity	"Root-cause" focused, but individualizes the problem of hunger, incorporates moral ideas of "deservingness" to explain why people are poor	"Root-cause" focused, with structural focus; newest model; seeks to address inequities; common following economic crisis,
Ideological Roots	Moral service, religious, Elizabethan charity, and Christian Commission	Neoliberalism, individualist, PRWORA, U.S. Sanitary Commission, Charity Organization Movement, parts of the Settlement House Movement, and therapeutic social work approaches	Social justice; closest match to sociological research on poverty; parts of the Settlement House Movement; and "radical social work" (Cassiman, 2007, p. 55)
Program Examples	Food boxes, food pantries, and soup kitchens	Job training, nutrition education, and budgeting classes	Living wage, political organizing, and racial justice initiatives
Discourse Examples	"We believe that the Bible has called us to serve those in need, to serve the least of these, and that's the poor, the widows, the hungry. We need to make sure that people are cared for." (Stacy, 2022)	"Our 'food for a lifetime' work, which is really about moving people to self-sufficiency and workforce development, job training, and nutrition education." (Troy, 2021)	"We are morally responsible to challenge and change the systems and structures that cause and perpetuate hunger." (Sharon, 2021)

The Traditional Charity Model

The traditional charity model reflects many of the practices in which food banks have historically engaged since their emergence during the late 1960s. Such practices include what many of this study's respondents called "feeding people today." These are now the customary ways that food banks distribute food through food boxes, food pantries, and meals. The model is tied to traditional religious understandings and approaches to charity that call on people to support the poor based on religious obligation (Katz, 2013; Zelizer, 1997). Today, both religious

and secular organizations use this model. Respondents from both types of organizations repeatedly described the moral imperative of connecting surplus food supplies to people experiencing hunger. However, religious food banks tended to embody the model most in their missions, programs, and metrics, and they were less likely to incorporate programs that sought to address the root causes of hunger.

U.S. society has long defined poverty as a moral condition based on individual choices, leading to debates on who is "deserving" and "undeserving" of assistance (Iceland, 2013; Katz, 2013). These classification systems have been examined by scholars to understand the morally imbued meanings of economic transactions and to understand better how inequality has persisted, and on what basis (Katz, 2013; Zelizer, 1997). Public assistance in the United States created a social safety net that predominately supports people considered part of the "deserving poor." The category of "deserving poor" reflects a moral view of who is deserving of assistance, but which groups are considered "deserving" has changed over time (Katz, 2013). The traditional charity model draws on long-held notions of "deservingness" tied to religious beliefs, which focuses on groups such as children and seniors.

The traditional charity model is unique in its focus on meeting immediate needs rather than addressing the larger problem of hunger. The model is built on the idea of giving food in-kind, which fits well with food banks' historical focus on food waste. The historical role of food banks in the private food assistance network is sourcing excess food and redistributing it to other nonprofit organizations and people in need. Distributing food in some form thus represents the majority of their work in terms of resource distribution and labor power. As a model, food banks are organized to source food and redistribute it to other organizations and people. The definition of food bank that I use (see Methodological Appendix) requires organizations to be responsible

for physically moving food. Thus, all food banks are, in some way, providing food to people, which falls within the traditional charity model. However, not all food bank administrators view distributing in-kind food as solving the problem of hunger. In relying on traditional notions of charity by supplying in-kind food, particularly to the "deserving poor," the model does not offer a permanent solution to food insecurity. When organizations design their responses using traditional charitable notions and construct metrics that reflect distribution of in-kind food, they measure a temporary solution, rather than their impact on the problem. This is still a valuable service that can alleviates experiences of hardship, but the charitable distribution of in-kind food does not provide a long-term solution to poverty.

The Personal Responsibility Model

The personal responsibility model moves beyond the traditional charity model in its effort to end hunger, rather than just meet immediate needs. The model is characterized by its individualistic approach and emphasizes many characteristics in contemporary social safety net policy, such as The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The model addresses food insecurity by reducing the problem of, and/or solution to, hunger at the individual level, drawing on more recent conceptions of "deservingness" that frame work as a central quality that determines a person's moral worth (De Souza, 2019; Katz, 2013). The model treats poverty as a personal failing, encouraging clients to make personal changes through job training, nutrition education, and budgeting. Particularly regarding food, the ideology includes a heavy focus on poor nutrition as a personal or cultural failing (Carney, 2015b; Guthman, 2011). Sociological research suggests that the individualized, work-first approach of PRWORA has intensified poverty and worsened food insecurity (Dickinson, 2019;

Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003). Research also suggests that food insecurity is a result of inequitable social structures, rather than individual and household decision-making. Rank (2023) offers an analogy between the game of musical chairs and poverty. If one or all players increase their speed, or secure a better job, due to the constraint of limited chairs, or low-paying jobs, some players must lose (Rank, 2023).

A recent shift in food banking emphasizes themes of nutrition and health (Carney, 2015b; Martin, 2021). Public health and nutrition experts have produced considerable research during the past 25 years regarding how food banks can incorporate nutrition better (Martin, 2021; McIntyre et al., 2016). I classify nutrition and health-based initiatives as part of the personal responsibility model. Widespread medicalization of poverty and social services was initiated by the Sanitary Commission and developed further by the Charity Organization Movement and therapeutic social work. These movements individualized poverty. U.S. medicalization trends (beyond poverty) are associated with themes of neoliberalism, proliferating since the 1970s and promoting market-centered interests, particularly in the commodified U.S. health system (Barbee et al., 2018; Conrad, 2013). Conrad (2013, p. 208) argues that medicalization individualizes social problems because it "and its clinical gaze turn complex social problems into clinical entities." In food studies literature, narratives that focus on people's "unhealthy" or "unethical" food choices perpetuate moralized class-based and racialized narratives that blame marginalized groups for their own problems and economic costs to society (Biltekoff, 2013; Carney, 2015b; Guthman, 2011). Narratives that frame food insecurity as a result of unhealthy and unwise choices are unsubstantiated and detract from systemic causes that have been tied empirically to food insecurity (Nevarez et al., 2016). Food insecurity in the United States results from economic precarity and not having sufficient resources to feed one's household (Riches, 2018).

This model gained popularity among food banks at the beginning of the 21st century. The administrators I interviewed often framed work that fit into the personal responsibility model as addressing "root causes" of hunger. Administrators who aligned with the personal responsibility model invoked "root causes" that individualized the problem of hunger, such as addiction, mental health, and education. Those who took the approach also sought to address hunger through individualized solutions. This model's response to hunger was teaching people morals and skills that food bank staff believed would lead to self-sufficiency. These individualistic root causes and solutions also do not accord with sociological literature on the root causes of poverty.

The Systemic Change Model

The systemic change model moves beyond meeting immediate needs, also seeking to address "root causes" of hunger. The systemic change perspective is distinguished from the personal responsibility perspective by its emphasis on hunger and poverty as issues of structural inequality that must be addressed at the collective level. The model is characterized by strategies of working to change inequitable power dynamics, addressing income and racial inequality, and improving the public social safety net. Using this model, food banks address systemic inequities that lead to food insecurity by raising wages, increasing affordable housing, and building political power among people who are experiencing food insecurity. Systemic change model strategies also involve political advocacy to improve the public social safety net through increased benefits and decreased restrictions.

The systemic change model aligns most closely with sociological research and theories on how to reduce inequality and food insecurity. The model points to structural conditions and historical processes that contribute to people's insufficient resources, incorporating principles of equity and social justice. The model ties food insecurity to poverty, low wages, high cost of

medical care, housing, and structural racism. Identifying hunger as an outcome of structural inequities, the model points to policy to address hunger. Framing hunger and poverty as outcomes of policies and an economic system, rather than an outcome of individual decision-making, is corroborated in the sociological literature on poverty (Brady, 2009; Brady et al., 2017; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Iceland, 2013; Riches, 2018). Aligning with the systemic change model, growing literature on hunger calls for taking a rights-based approach to address poverty and hunger (Bellows, 2020; Chappell, 2018; De Souza, 2019; Dickinson, 2019; Elver, 2023; Jurkovich, 2020; Lohnes, 2023; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018; Riches & Silvasti, 2014; San-Epifanio, 2022; Spring et al., 2022). Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

> Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services. (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, p. 7)

The U.S. does not formally recognize the right to food at the national level, and it has distanced itself from the responsibility of fulfilling this right (FAO, 2021; Jurkovich, 2020). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognizes the right to food as a means to end hunger (Elver, 2023). Food is a human right, in and of itself. Still, historically marginalized groups who have experienced other human rights violations (e.g., women and Indigenous people) disproportionately have their right to food violated (Elver, 2023). Recognizing food as a right gives people the political legitimacy to call on the government to meet their essential needs in a dignified manner (Chappell, 2018; Clemens, 2017; Jurkovich, 2020; Riches, 2018). Such a framework calls for rethinking the commodification of food and the political economic systems that prevent people from accessing it (Elver, 2023).

In trying to change the social structures that uphold inequity, the systemic change model seeks to change power relations to make them more equitable. This involves both reflecting on one's own personal or organizational position and the forms of political, social, and economic capital at one's disposal. It also involves using that capital to redistribute resources to the people and organizations that have been historically disadvantaged. The model reflects a change from viewing food banks as powerless to recognizing the power they have.

Geography is another structure that impacts people's experiences with food insecurity (Allard, 2009, 2017; Bowen et al., 2021; Coleman-Jensen & Steffen, 2017). It is important to understand how policies such as redlining have shaped places and the food system, rather than simply understanding spatial disparities that lie on the surface (Bowen et al., 2021; Deener, 2020). In an example of surface-level understanding of spatial disparities, a growing body of research assesses how space impacts food access through food deserts, identifying communities without proximate grocery stores (Sadler et al., 2016). However, this measure misleadingly suggests that the problem lies in grocery store locations (Brinkley et al., 2019; Sadler et al., 2016). Instead, it is important to assess the deeper structural conditions that led to disinvestment in communities and to people having insufficient resources to purchase food in the market (Bowen et al., 2021; Brinkley et al., 2019; Sadler et al., 2016).

Adopting strategies in the systemic change model appears to be a recent shift in many organizations, coinciding with the rise of other social movements, such as Black Lives Matter and the Fight for $15. Many organizations increased attention to racial inequality following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, but those with approaches most firmly oriented to systemic change began to focus on racial inequity prior to 2020. Food banks that have given positions of power to people who are experiencing food insecurity tended to have more strategies that lay

within the systemic change model, demonstrating the cascading effects associated with taking this approach. Programs that fit into the model were new, reflecting changes in the sector during the past decade.

Conclusion

People often assume that nonprofits were created to benefit disadvantaged groups and that food banks were created to address hunger, but the historical legacies of both suggest more complicated intentions. Desire to protect elite interests and power influenced development of nonprofits greatly. The composition and form of contemporary U.S. food banks are influenced heavily by the histories of charity, nonprofits, public food assistance programs, and the origins of food banking itself. Public food assistance programs were designed to benefit agriculture, rather than prioritizing those in poverty. U.S. food banks are framed as organizations to address hunger, but they were designed to address food system surpluses rather than hunger. By examining how food assistance programs and nonprofits themselves were created prioritizing other interests, it is clearer how these responses have become tied to solutions that do not represent the ideal solution to the problem. By examining food banks alongside prominent ideological responses to hunger, it is also clear that food bank programs are imbued with moral meanings. These histories elucidate why the United States has a weaker social safety net, with overreliance on food assistance.

By developing three models of food banking, I can examine how historical approaches to addressing poverty manifested differently in food banks. As food banks struggle with what it means to be organizations that focus on hunger, these models explicate their disparate approaches. The models point to ways that food banks become involved in moral debates on what should be done for people in poverty and what causes it. Food banks have increasingly

become a respected authority on the issues of hunger, by the public and politicians, and their approaches to addressing hunger hold influence beyond the private food assistance system.

Understanding food banks as solutions to food waste that then found the problem of hunger explains why food banks have struggled to address the problem. Examining the work of food banks through various moralized models of addressing poverty highlights how the private social safety net is involved in moral projects that reproduce inequalities. In the next chapter, I explore what the three models look like in the work of food banks. I trace how the models are reflected in food bank missions and programs, finding that most food banks reflect a combination of the models.

Chapter 3. Models of Food Banking in Action Exploring Food Banks' Responses to Hunger Through Missions and Programs

Abbreviations

BIPOC:	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CFAP:	Coronavirus Food Assistance Program
CSA:	Community Service Administration
FAO:	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IRS:	Internal Revenue Service
LFPA:	Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program
LGBTQ:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
PRWORA:	The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996
SNAP:	The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TEFAP:	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
USDA:	United States Department of Agriculture
WIC:	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

In this chapter, I use the models of food banks outlined in the prior chapter to trace how ideologies of addressing poverty manifest in food banks' missions and programming today. These models can be found in food bank mission statements and program design. Food bank programs represent how organizations work to fulfill their missions, and they are the methods by which they expend and distribute resources. Food bank programs are important since their structures impact the accessibility of assistance and the resources that food banks provide (De Souza, 2019; Dickinson, 2019; Haynes Stein, 2023; Martin, 2021). When food assistance

programs reproduce notions of "moral servitude" and "deservingness" that target children and the elderly, they reflect the "traditional charity model." Food banks have also increasingly shifted their programming to align with ending hunger, a role the U.S. public ascribes to food banks and that more than half claim in their missions. Yet to end hunger, food banks would need to address its root causes. Contemporary sociological research suggests that the root causes of hunger are based on poverty which further reflects ongoing structural inequities, and yet only about half of food banks in my interviews addressed hunger by targeting structural inequities that accord with a "systemic change model." A majority of the food banks I investigated had at least some programming that addressed what they claimed were the root causes of hunger through individualistic approaches, such as job training, budgeting classes, and nutrition education that align with the personal responsibility model. When food banks portray themselves as addressing the "root causes" of hunger through individualistic programs, they perpetuate a narrative that blames individuals for their impoverishment. Even when these programs help individuals, they do nothing to help the millions of other people who are working in essential jobs (e.g., farm labor) and are paid too little to meet basic needs. As such, funding individualistic programs reduces the resources and attention that could be used on programs that address the structural inequities that are the root cause of hunger.

While the premise behind food banking was the redistribution of food waste, food banks have expanded to include many programs that are not food waste based. Even when food banks are not distributing federal commodities and donated foods, they often use their resources to continue distributing food in-kind, meaning they devote resources to distribute physical food products rather than providing more general support. Food banks also directly administer funds and offer service-based programs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional sources of excess

food disappeared, but food banks received huge influxes of cash donations, a financial gain that led some to adapt and create new programs that aligned, in some cases, with their missions of systemic change or, in other cases, personal responsibility models. Still others used the influx to continue preexisting food assistance programs that reflected a traditional charity model, but with purchased food instead. I used the pandemic context to explore food bank programs during a period of change. By tying food bank missions and programs to the three models, I demonstrate how historical legacies have impacted food banking and what these ideologies look like in practice.

Food Bank Missions

A food bank's mission statement provides a proclamation of its values, goals, and agendas. Mission statements are formal declarations of organizational intent that nonprofits must declare for IRS documents. They are meant to focus collective efforts and are designed to unify donors, workers, and volunteers in support of the organization based on a shared agenda (Minkoff & Powell, 2006). An organization's mission often does not align entirely with practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012), but mission statements do impact dispositions to partake in activities such as advocacy (Suárez, 2020). Food bank administrators referenced and quoted their missions in their interviews often.[15] I therefore examine food bank mission statements as an indicator of organizational goals and values and how they correspond with organizational practices.

The mission statements I analyzed reflect tensions present in U.S. food banks as they address competing demands on how they redistribute food waste and seek to end hunger. Some food banks are currently shifting from their historical position as gleaners and redistributors of

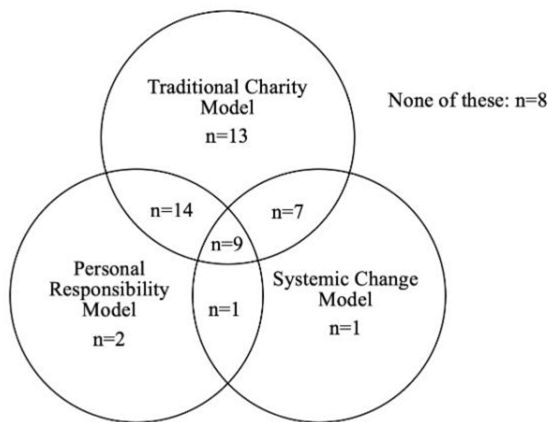
[15] I use archival materials for this section to protect confidentiality, since mission statements are identifiable.

farming and corporate excess to new missions focused on eradicating hunger. Food banks have shifted their missions from seeking to alleviate hunger by supplying food to trying to end hunger by addressing root causes of poverty. Some have even adopted strategies that focus on structural root causes, including how poverty, inequality, and systemic racism might be resolved.

Many food bank missions incorporate concepts from multiple models, reflecting their historical roots in hunger alleviation. Of the organizations in my interview sample, 78% mentioned providing food or alleviating hunger and poverty in their missions, aligning with the traditional charity model. Fifty-eight percent mentioned ending hunger or poverty in their mission statements, demonstrating that many see their work as more than simply providing food. The personal responsibility model was also featured heavily in missions, with 47% of missions including themes of individualism, self-sufficiency, nutrition, and health. The systemic change model was in the minority, with 33% of the missions I reviewed referencing issues of structural change, equity, advocacy, and food or social justice. Finally, 56% of the food bank programs I reviewed had mission statements that incorporated themes from all three models (See Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1

Organizational Mission Statements and Food Bank Model Themes (N=55)



Note. This figure shows the cooccurrence of multiple themes. Of the eight organizations whose missions did not align with a theme, seven had missions that featured ending hunger and poverty but did not specify whether they viewed this as an individual or structural issue, so they could not be placed in either the personal responsibility or systemic change models.

In interviews, a food bank administrator explained the historical trajectory of how food bank mission statements have changed over time to align with these three models. Justin, a Feeding America food bank CEO who had been a food bank administrator for nearly 40 years, highlighted the importance of mission statements and how they have shifted:

> When I took [the food bank] over, the mission at that time was to find food and other grocery products and to distribute that food to other nonprofit organizations and educate people about hunger. … As we evolved, we kept tweaking that. Education then became advocate with a small "a," and then it became advocate with a big "A," and then we realized we could sign people up for SNAP and put a lot more meals on people's tables faster for the population that was eligible for SNAP than we could by finding surplus food. … Over the last decade, [we] have realized… How do we step into root cause work, it's not mission creep…. You can see it in the mission statements. I think Oregon has the simplest one. They say, "End hunger and its root causes." … [We] really started to talk about "thrive and prosperity," really start to talk about wages." (Justin, 2021)

Justin traced how his food bank shifted from emphasizing distributing surplus, donated food to doing advocacy work in support of federal in-kind food programs. More recently, his food bank expanded its advocacy to address the root causes of hunger through a systemic approach that targets the structural mechanisms of inequality. The evolution of food banking he described began with how his organization centered on redistributing food waste and advanced to a focus on ending hunger by addressing its root causes through public policy work on poverty. Justin claimed that most food banks initially focused on providing food, reliant on the traditional charity model. Over time, his food bank's mission transitioned to align with the systemic change

model. Justin reported that this is common, and it was also described by other food bank administrators during their interviews. Other administrators detailed similar trajectories, but some also described how their first ventures into root cause work were framings that were individual before moving to structural root causes. However, not all food banks progressed linearly or at the same speed, as Justin outlined. Many remain grounded in traditional charity and personal responsibility models. Below, I outline values and approaches emphasized in food bank missions, and how they fit in the three ideological frameworks.

The Traditional Charity Mission

Food banks that pursue a traditional charity model focus on redistributing food to meet immediate needs. Seventy-eight percent of organizations in my interview sample had missions that described providing food or alleviating hunger. Mission statements that focused on alleviating immediate food needs were sometimes accompanied by moral language regarding religious service and food waste. For example, Midwest Food Bank, the largest group of food banks outside of Feeding America's network, details a mission that continues to reflect the traditional charity model's emphasis on providing in-kind food while drawing from religious values. The organization's website states:

> As a faith-based organization, it is the mission of Midwest Food Bank to share the love of Christ by alleviating hunger and malnutrition locally and throughout the world and providing disaster relief; all without discrimination. Our vision is to provide industry-leading food relief to those in need while feeding them spiritually. (Midwest Food Bank, 2023)

This mission clearly draws on religious commitments, providing an outlook rooted deeply in traditional notions of charity and spiritual renewal. The organization's goal of providing food relief to alleviate hunger evidences an emphasis on distributing in-kind food. However, there is no mention of addressing conditions that cause hunger.

The Food Bank for Central & Northeast Missouri frames itself as an organization that provides food to people who are experiencing hunger. However, its mission statement does not emphasize religious values; it instead emphasizes the food bank's role in acquiring and redistributing food to help those in need, particularly the additional needs created in times of crisis, such as Covid-19 and natural disasters:

> (The Food Bank) is a regional disaster and hunger relief network that acquires and distributes millions of pounds of donated food annually. Its mission is to help and feed people in need. (The Food Bank for Central & Northeast Missouri, 2021)

Other food banks emphasized the redistribution of food while drawing from discourse that emphasized mitigating food waste instead of religious values, which aligns with the legacy of food banking in the United States. During an interview with the manager of a Feeding America PDO food bank, Nick (2021) reported that their mission centers on improving access to healthy food while reducing food waste. He highlighted gleaning produce in his articulation of the food bank's mission, rather than addressing food insecurity or poverty. He also emphasized sourcing food with high nutrition over both quantity and meeting the immediate food needs of hungry people, placing him and his organization at odds with other traditional charity models. Nick shared:

> Our mission is not to rescue as much food as possible ... We have plateaued, and we have focused on decreasing sweets and increasing vegetables, so more visits to farms... We don't want the emergency food system to be a system that exists forever. So, we allocate our resources with envisioning that people have access to food at all times through other means that aren't emergency related. (Nick, 2021)

When asked about how he envisioned people meeting their food needs, he cited the efficacy of programs such as pandemic EBT and universal meal programs, stating that people would still get "assistance but more universal assistance, more assistance that's streamlined, cause the food pantry system is incredibly inefficient. Our food system is incredibly inefficient

and inequitable" (Nick, 2021). He further suggested that the government was a far better provider of assistance, stressing his nonprofit's role in mitigating food waste and providing healthy food to people (Nick, 2021). However, he also affirmed, his food bank was not in the business of addressing underlying social issues that cause hunger.

Missions that Address Hunger and its Root Causes

Several food banks still have mission statements grounded in the traditional charity model, but most position themselves as seeking to end hunger in some way. Fifty-eight percent had missions that focused on ending hunger or poverty. Missions that sought to end hunger offered various perspectives on how this could be accomplished, ranging from vague statements related to eliminating hunger to multi-part missions that included providing food and detailing how hunger can be ended through individual improvement or structural, policy changes. By framing their missions on ending hunger, food banks insert themselves as a solution to hunger. In Second Harvest's 2008 rebranding to Feeding America, it explained that the "primary objective of the branding change is to more fully engage the public in the fight against hunger" (Feeding America, 2008). Feeding America's CEO at the time of the rebranding said:

> This change to Feeding America represents a deep commitment to our mission and public engagement on the issue of hunger…. From the research, we know that our new identity also invites the public to understand and commit to fighting hunger. (Feeding America, 2008)

At the time of rebranding, Second Harvest's mission continued to be "to feed America's hungry through a nationwide network of member food banks and engage our country in the fight to end hunger" (Feeding America, 2009). The original name, Second Harvest, alluded to food banks' roots in produce gleaning. The rebranding highlighted its focus on ending hunger, which also can be seen in the Feeding America Network. Many Feeding America food banks have

missions that focus on providing food and ending hunger through unspecified means. For example, the Regional East Texas Food Bank's mission is "to fight hunger and feed hope in East Texas" (Regional East Texas Food Bank, 2019). However, many food banks took more specific approaches in their missions of how to end hunger, which fit the personal responsibility or systemic change models.

Missions of Personal Responsibility

While claiming to end hunger, some food banks took individualistic approaches to how this goal can be achieved, focusing on ending hunger by changing nutritional and health habits, education, and promoting self-sufficiency. Forty-seven percent of organizations had missions that included themes of individualism, self-sufficiency, health, and nutrition. Feeding Northeast Florida's mission leaned toward individual root causes, since its mission is "to nourish hope and restore dignity for those living with hunger through access to nutritious food, innovative programming and education" as part of its vision of a "hunger-free" region (Feeding Northeast Florida, 2023b). Its website details its focus on "breaking the cycle" of poverty, suggesting that poverty is rooted in individual decision-making and norms. The website states, "Feeding Northeast Florida believes in breaking the cycle of poverty through access to quality food resources and by providing the resources and education necessary to increase family stability and economic self-sufficiency" (Feeding Northeast Florida, 2023a). This statement suggests that hunger and poverty can be solved at household or individual levels, rather than through large structural changes to society. The Food Bank of Northeast Georgia also focuses on ending hunger through in-kind food provision and education. Its website states, "The Food Bank of Northeast Georgia works to address hunger and end food insecurity by serving communities across our region, providing consistent access to nourishing food and relevant education" (Food

Bank of Northeast Georgia, 2023). Themes of nutrition, education, and self-sufficiency were common in food bank missions, aligning with the personal responsibility model.

Missions of Systemic Change

Food banks are increasingly adopting missions that eliminate the structural inequities that lead to hunger. One-third of the missions I analyzed included references to equity, systemic change, advocacy, and food/social justice, representing a shift from produce gleaning and food redistribution toward creating systemic change. For example, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank has a mission to “leverage the power of community to achieve lasting solutions to hunger and its root causes” (Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, 2021). It emphasizes the food bank’s role as a change-maker and the organization’s power to create systemic change. Likewise, Northwest Harvest’s mission is “growing food justice through collective action,” tying its work to the food justice movement (Northwest Harvest, 2021).

The Greater Chicago Food Depository also has a mission that centers on systemic change, emphasizing the right to food. Its website emphasizes the food bank’s shift from simply feeding people to addressing the causes of food insecurity and poverty:

> Our mission is to end hunger. We believe food is a basic human right. To achieve our mission, we work in partnership with a network of community-based organizations and individuals. Together, we connect our neighbors with healthy food, lift our voices and advance solutions that address the root causes of hunger – poverty, systemic inequity, and structural racism. Together, we are greater. Together, we can end hunger. (Greater Chicago Food Depository, 2022)

This food bank names the causes of hunger as “poverty, systemic inequity and structural racism,” taking a more direct position than food banks that do not specify hunger’s root causes. This food bank takes a stand on several recurrent themes in food banks, such as partnering with community members, emphasizing healthy food, and calling for systemic change.

Missions that Invoke Multiple Models

While a minority of food banks relied on one model to guide their mission, most had mission statements that emphasized providing food in-kind, alongside addressing root causes, balancing the two approaches. Fifty-six percent of organizations in my interview sample had missions that included themes from at least two of the three models. These statements included an array of approaches that exist in contemporary food banking, suggesting how organizations' ideological orientations have both changed and become less clear. The National Feeding America Organization's new mission is "to advance change in America by ensuring equitable access to nutritious food for all in partnership with food banks, policymakers, supporters, and the communities we serve" (Feeding America, 2021a). In comparison to its previous mission, the new one emphasizes nutrition, equity, and advocacy, each of which represents broader shifts in the food banking sector in recent years. Nutrition goals align with medicalization and the personal responsibility model, while equity and advocacy align with the systemic change model. The mission emphasizes working with diverse stakeholders and creating equitable change. The mission is, however, vague about what change is being advocated and how equity can be ensured, which was common among food bank missions.

This trend was also evident among food banks. For instance, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank's mission appeals to all three approaches of traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change. Their multi-part mission is "to mobilize resources to fight hunger in our community" by sourcing and redistributing "nutritious food," promoting community involvement in hunger relief, conducting nutrition education, and advocating for public policies to benefit clients (Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, 2023). The food bank emphasizes the redistribution of in-kind food, which is emblematic of the traditional charity

model, and the importance of nutrition and nutrition education to fight hunger through an individual approach that aligns with the personal responsibility model. It also advocates collective action and changes to policies, drawing on the systemic change model.

More than half of food bank missions included at least two approaches, reflecting major trends that impacted the industry during the past few decades. Mission statements represent an important source of direction for nonprofits, drawn on by administrators to legitimize their work, but they do not necessarily match what food banks do daily. I thus explored food banks' programs further.

Food Bank Programs

By studying food banks' programs, I examined the ways that the food banking models and mission statements influenced food banks' work to distribute food and address hunger. I found that food bank programs tended to lag behind changes to food bank missions. Programs reflected the organizational legacy of food banking rooted in food waste and a multitude of changes that had been adopted over time. Food bank administrators often described the addition of new programs, but they rarely mentioned discontinuing programs, apart from pandemic-related emergency changes made due to closing schools and a need for social distancing. In the following, I focus on both the distribution of food in-kind and food bank programs that informants considered to address the root causes of hunger.

In-Kind Food Distribution

The food bank model is based on collecting and redistributing in-kind food resources to other nonprofit organizations, which can be supplemented with distributing directly to people. In order to be included in my sample as a food bank, an organization had to redistribute food to other organizations who then distributed it to their clients. Such in-kind food need not be excess

food. Still, in most cases, it is a byproduct of cultural and agricultural surpluses obtained either directly from private agri-food businesses or indirectly through government commodities. This reflects food banks' organizational legacy as a solution to corporate and agricultural food waste that then found its problem of hunger. The availability of excess food encouraged expansion of food banks, but during interviews, administrators reported that they were increasingly purchasing more food during the pandemic, and at higher prices due to inflation. For example, Ben, executive director of a Feeding America partner agency, reported that he spent nearly $50 a box for his nonprofit's Christmas food boxes for families with children (Ben, 2022).

Food distribution can be an important form of immediate relief for people experiencing food insecurity, and many food bank administrators emphasized the moral imperative of distributing food to minimize immediate suffering. Still, distributing in-kind food is a form of symptom alleviation that does not directly impact the root causes of hunger. Providing a family with food does not solve the economic strain that made its members food insecure. For this reason, many food banks also worked to create change beyond their in-kind food distributions. All food bank administrators I spoke with viewed in-kind food distribution as an important part of their work. Specifically, food banks distribute in-kind food resources through two methods—they either distribute resources to partner agencies or they distribute resources to people in need directly.

Partner agencies are a required part of the food bank model since food banks act as hubs, brokering resources in the private food assistance network. Food distributed to partner agencies accounts for a large part of resource allocation, but food banks were largely uninvolved in the operations of partner agencies. I detail examples of further involvement. As food banks

administered federal commodity food programs such as TEFAP and CFAP, they relied on both partner agencies and direct distribution to fulfill obligations of food distribution.

Most food banks also operated some form of direct distribution to people in need, though the scope and nature of this work varied. Prior to the pandemic, direct distribution represented a smaller proportion of food banks' food distribution (De Faria, 2021). However, partner agency closures during the pandemic forced food banks to take on a larger role, distributing more food directly (De Faria, 2021). Ron reported, "I think the future…in the food bank world looks like direct distribution," sharing his vision of the lasting legacy of the pandemic (Ron, 2021). Common operations for new direct distributions during the pandemic included pop-up distributions, mass feeding sites, and mobile food pantries. These distribution formats allowed food banks to augment their network of nonprofit partner agencies. Food banks operated these distributions in response to geographic gaps in coverage, and to distribute larger amounts of food while adhering to social distancing guidelines that required distributions to be outdoors or involve limited contact.

All food banks distributed food through their networks of partner agencies, and some directly to people in need. They organized these programs variously, aligning differently with each of the models. Variations on these in-kind food distributions included targeting food to the deserving poor, targeting food to historically disadvantaged populations, influencing the practices of nonprofit partners, intentionally changing nonprofit networks, and focusing on nutrition and health during food distribution.

In-Kind Food Programs for the Deserving Poor: Traditional Charity and Personal Responsibility. All food banks in my interview sample targeted programs to serve children or seniors, populations traditionally "deserving" of assistance. These included direct service

programs and prioritizing nonprofit partners that served these same populations. Programs for children existed at 98% of food banks, and 96% had programs focused on seniors.[16] Bouek (2018a) finds that food bank programs for children and seniors are heavily influenced by food bank donors. Similarly, when I asked Jerry, a Feeding America food bank CEO, how his food bank's programs were established, he described how many programs were created based on what board members, donors, and advocates asked for. School programs were established after principals, administrators, and school nurses reached out to the food bank. One board member asked him what they were doing for children under five, which led them to create programs for young children. Another funder wanted to focus on middle and high schoolers, so Jerry's food bank started targeting programs to reach just those ages (Jerry, 2021). When I asked Randy, another Feeding America food bank executive director, how his food bank's programs for children and seniors were established, he replied:

> The piloting and funding came originally from Feeding America ... And so, Feeding America early on in 2007 started a lot of the piloting funding through Walmart and some other ones, Bezos grants, Amazon, provided the piloting for that, and then we've just sustained it over the last 14 years. (Randy, 2021)

Randy's response demonstrates funders can have lasting impacts that extend beyond the length of their financial commitment when they initiate programs that target who they believe are the "deserving poor."

Even when programs that targeted children and seniors were more expensive, food bank administrators described being able to obtain greater financial support. For children's programs, in which children received food for the weekend in a backpack, food bank administrators

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[16] These counts include both in-kind and other types of targeted programs. Targeted, age-based programs were not as common at other organizations, such as partner state associations.

described doing special purchase orders of child-friendly foods and easy-to-open packages. Heather, a Feeding America food bank vice president, said the food cost $4 to $5 per backpack, without accounting for freight and distribution fees (Heather, 2021). For comparison, the National Feeding America Organization reports that a donation of this amount would allow it to secure and distribute at least 48 pounds of food (Feeding America, n.d.). Backpack programs were established based on the premise that children would use the food to feed themselves over the weekend, but several food bank administrators described replacing the programs with school-based pantries to reflect the realities of household food practices better. Raymond, a Feeding America food bank CEO, reported that after conducting research on how the backpack programs worked, his food bank decided to switch to food pantries that served entire families. He said:

> One of the very first studies we ever did was on the efficacy of the backpack program…. We found out that like 68% of all the food that was in the backpack was being eaten by the family on Friday night. We had this romantic vision that the child was squirreling away their little whatever it was that we gave them and eating it throughout the weekend, and somehow, we were sustaining them. We weren't. (Raymond, 2021)

Raymond’s story demonstrates how such programs were constructed around trying to feed just children, those considered most “deserving,” but ended up being an ineffective use of resources that could be used more effectively to feed entire families.

Senior programs were also more expensive because specific foods were purchased and food was delivered to people’s homes. Heather’s food bank did both, tailoring contents of food boxes for seniors and delivering them (Heather, 2021). Despite increased costs of administering the program to a population with lower food insecurity than the national average, the food bank easily found funding. Heather stated, “Senior health and senior hunger—it just pulls on people's heartstrings, and we’ve not had a problem funding that program with grants” (Heather, 2021).

Anthony, who had been in food banking for nearly 30 years and served as CEO for two-thirds of that period, highlighted recent trends regarding how views on deservingness have changed. He characterized the 1990s as much more dependent on government funding, with more public scrutiny "on whether people deserved having some of this help or not" (Anthony, 2021). He claimed that food banks have since acquired funding from private donors "who certainly were a little more bought into [the idea that] nobody should be hungry" (Anthony, 2021). He said that there is "more general consensus that people shouldn't starve to death here," and that new private donor sources led to more specialized programs at food banks, "especially for kids" (Anthony, 2021). This suggests shifts in priorities, but the programming still prioritizes moral prescriptions of deservingness.

In some cases, food bank administrators supported such programs because they reasoned children and seniors are the most vulnerable or high-risk. When I asked Tiffany how her Feeding America food bank's children and senior programs came to be, she stated, "They are the most high-risk populations…the most vulnerable are definitely gonna be our children, and then seniors specifically that are living on fixed incomes" (Tiffany, 2022). Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, recognized that child hunger is far rarer than adult hunger, and he sought to eradicate it for this reason (Scott, 2021). However, he also stated that the project failed because there was no feasible way to track its impact on such a small population. Scott's program was unique, with its awareness of the low rates of child and senior food insecurity.

Some food banks targeted programs for others considered part of the "deserving poor," such as veterans and military service members, college students, and people with cancer. Such programs were commonly featured on food banks' websites, encouraging donor support. This aligns with a review of 198 Feeding America food bank websites, which found that five of six

food banks' homepages featured images of children or descriptions of childhood hunger and programs that targeted children (Fisher, 2017a, p. 30). Administrators described targeted programs as aligning with government programs, Feeding America program development, and donor requests. Common programs included school backpack and pantry programs, summer feeding programs for children, distribution of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (a USDA commodities program for seniors), distributions at senior community centers, and home delivery of food for seniors. These targeted populations align with societal conceptions of who is morally "deserving" of assistance (Katz, 2013). Such programs offer important resources to these populations, but they can also exacerbate inequities by excluding the most food-insecure people.

In-Kind Food Programs That Target Inequity: Systemic Change. Food bank administrators I interviewed were beginning to focus on how they could target direct distribution programs better and thus reduce systemic inequities regarding who has access to food. Programs that provided services to people in groups most likely to experience food insecurity were less common than programs that served the "deserving poor," but they still existed at most food banks in my sample. Two-thirds of food banks had at least one program for immigrants and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations,[17] but administrators rarely discussed directing programs at other groups that experience food insecurity disproportionately, such as LGBTQ populations (n=3). The administrators commonly described these as newer programs, and they operated fewer such programs than those that targeted children and seniors. These programs did not seek to remedy structural inequities that cause hunger, but they did focus on creating more equitable allocations of in-kind food assistance.

[17] These counts include both in-kind and other targeted programs.

The food banks recognized the impact that decisions had on equity. Liz, a director at a state food bank association, highlighted how food banks impact equity with every decision they make, intentionally or not, stating:

> That's really interesting where issues of equity and social vulnerability and all of these things sort of come into play…. Food banks inevitably are…. Even when they're not making decisions about this, they're making decisions about who they serve and where….Sometimes the food banking is not data-driven, but decisions are still made about where resources are allocated. (Liz, 2022)

Exemplifying Liz's point, some food bank administrators rejected prioritizing equity in their programs. Frank, CEO of a Feeding America food bank, reported how he responded to calls to be more culturally responsive to ethnic diversity in his community:

> The very top priority is: get calories to people to keep them alive. And in that category, they don't have refrigeration, and they don't have what other people have, so I don't care who criticizes. We're not really going to let people die in our community. And then the next one is: get people fed who just need to feed their families with the best nutritious food we can get to them, and as quickly as we can get it to them. But the third tier and it's not to discriminate between the ethnicities. When you think about the size we've taken on, and I think we have 58 different ethnicities in our [region]. I want to get there, but we have to feed the masses first, and we have to get food out to everybody. (Frank, 2021)

Few other food bank administrators were so direct about this point, but Frank clearly ranked his priorities. He highlighted that his top priority is simply getting food to people, which he accompanied with some descriptions of his food bank's efforts to serve people who are experiencing homelessness, corresponding with the traditional charity model (Frank, 2021). He then emphasized feeding nutritious food to families, which corresponded to the personal responsibility model. Only after that did he emphasize not discriminating. In contrast, some food banks addressed inequities, aligning with the systemic change model. They addressed inequities regarding who experiences hunger and who historically has had the greatest access to food assistance by targeting programs to those that disproportionately experience hunger. Kim, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described her organization's efforts to make programs more

accessible to everyone by lowering program eligibility requirements. She explained that the only requirement is that people want to participate. When asked how this decision was made, she said:

> We have a very, very strong equity lens at [our] food bank, and our equity lens leads us to say, "What's in the way of people being able to access programs and services?," and particularly again, our equity constituencies of Black and Brown communities or immigrant, migrant communities. And usually, most barriers have the, hopefully unintended, consequence of pushing those particular constituencies disproportionately out of participation. (Kim, 2021)

Kim highlights how her organization decided to reduce barriers to access because of how they lead to inequitable program access across groups. This accords with extant research on how barriers to access are experienced differently by race, gender, housing, and ability status and are disproportionately experienced by groups with the greatest need (Haynes Stein, 2023). Kim stated that she hopes other food banks do not intentionally create barriers for immigrants and people of color. However, research also suggests that some social service-based nonprofits, including food pantries, intentionally implement such policies to create racialized barriers to access (Bolger, 2021, 2022; Ray et al., 2023).[18]

Food bank administrators (n=14) described offering programs designed to serve undocumented people and occupations with high proportions of undocumented workers (e.g., farmworkers and day laborers). Such programs provide in-kind food assistance to a highly food-insecure population that is hard to reach and ineligible for most public programs. However, these programs did not disrupt or question the inequitable, commoditized food system that fails to adequately pay essential workers who produce much of the food distributed by food banks.

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[18] This research is not specifically on food banks, but does refer to dynamics that are happening in food bank partner agencies.

Another way food banks sought to address inequities through in-kind food distribution was by distributing what food bank administrators frequently called “culturally appropriate” or “culturally relevant” food. Such programs address commonly held assumptions regarding what types of foods people want and should eat. For some food bank administrators, this meant reexamining what foods are most appealing and should be a priority when sourcing, while still providing most people with the same food. Shawn, an independent food bank CEO, said:

> Things like SpaghettiOs are culturally relevant to a really small group of people, but a carrot, a cabbage, an onion are featured on families’ tables all across the world. So if we can distribute fresh fruits and vegetables, we are bringing foods that people need that are culturally relevant to almost every people group on Earth. (Shawn, 2021)

Shawn’s approach sought to identify foods with universal appeal. Other food banks took different approaches, identifying foods that are popular within specific communities. One food bank administrator described sourcing lentils for a Nepali Bhutanese community, and another provided frozen tapioca and Spam to a partner agency that serves Pacific Islanders. Still, other food banks diversified the types of food available by considering cultural preferences when food sourcing, while also providing food assistance clients with the opportunity to choose their own food, which addresses both cultural preferences and dietary restrictions better (Martin, 2021).

Equity-oriented, in-kind food distributions were important to addressing food banks’ missions. Many food bank administrators pointed to the duality of their work that necessitated both providing food for today and eliminating the need for food in the future. Sharon, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said, “I believe we are morally responsible to provide food to people experiencing hunger today. And I believe we are morally responsible to challenge and change the systems and structures that cause and perpetuate hunger” (Sharon, 2021). Such distributions allowed food banks to focus on changing patterns and practices that reinforce inequities with

programs that have immediate effects. Some also sought to extend their impact by shaping other organizations in the private food assistance system.

Food Bank Oversight of Partner Agencies' In-Kind Food Distribution. The food bank administrators described the formal bureaucratic processes they use to vet new partner agencies and continue relationships with established ones. Food banks mostly limited their engagement with partner agencies to distributing food to them, sometimes collecting a shared maintenance fee, and ensuring that partner agencies were IRS-recognized nonprofit organizations, maintaining food safety measures, and reporting metrics. Through requirements, food banks have significant power to shape the broader network of the more than 60,000 partner organizations they serve, but this was a rare means of influence among the food bank administrators who were interviewed.

The administrators commonly described requirements that allow donations to be tax-exempt by the IRS, food safety requirements, Feeding America's requirements, and USDA's non-discrimination policy for the TEFAP program. Some of these measures protect food quality and monitor where resources are being distributed, promoting safe and equitable access to food. However, general requirements of partner agencies focused especially on recordkeeping and food safety standards that maintain the legitimacy of food banks and fulfill obligations to resource providers. A typical food bank requires of its partners what is required of them by regulators, which include the IRS, food and safety regulators, and Feeding America. Food bank donations are caught in a complicated web of tax-exempt nonprofit regulations that keep donated food from competing with traditional markets (Lohnes, 2021). Two food bank administrators described confronting legal issues when trying to work with mutual aid groups that were not 501c3 nonprofits. Tax-exempt donations require that food not be resold and that it can be used

only for certain charitable purposes (Lohnes, 2021). Stacy said that her food bank could not supply “little free pantries” (similar to little free libraries) because they did not know who was taking the food (Stace, 2022). Focusing on only food safety and nonprofit regulations is a typical approach, exemplified by Cheryl, a Feeding America food bank executive director. She described an involved process for food safety checks, but said that they leave requirements tied to clients to the partner agency’s discretion:

> For the food safety issues, there’s a lot of oversight. Food safety gets bigger and deeper, and it's so we go to the agency, we inspect the agency, we make sure they're doing with the food, what they're supposed to be doing, all that kind of stuff. The requirement on what the client should be verifying, that's totally up to them. (Cheryl, 2021)

The administrators often described ways, beyond food safety and IRS nonprofit requirements, that they thought their partner agencies could promote dignity and equity better, though they rarely enforced these policies. Such recommendations included allowing people to select their own food (known as “client choice”), reducing paperwork, eliminating demonstration of need, and expanding pantry hours. These recommendations accord with research on how food assistance programs can promote food access and client dignity (e.g., eliminating documentation requirements, promoting choice over food, reducing scheduling conflicts, and avoiding surveillance) (Bolger, 2022; De Souza, 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Haynes Stein, 2023; Hill & Guittar, 2023; Martin, 2021; McIntyre et al., 2016; Poppendieck, 1998)

Few food banks use their power as resource distributors to ask partner agencies to align with their values. Some administrators were aware that strict documentation requirements place a heavy burden on food assistance clients, reinforcing the same racialized administrative burdens in the public food assistance system (Ray et al., 2023). Documentation requirements make food assistance especially more difficult to access for immigrants. Such requirements are tied to

histories of surveillance of the poor and moral ideas of deservingness found in the traditional charity and personal responsibility models. Sharon, a Feeding America food bank CEO, shared how her food bank advocates for clients' best interests in relationships with partner agencies, seeking to change these requirements:

> We ask our agency partners not to require income eligibility, not to ask for any kind of proof or verification of income, of address, of nationality or citizenship status. We ask that they not require any participants to divulge any demographic information that they're not interested in sharing. (Sharon, 2021)

Jennifer, also a Feeding America food bank CEO, similarly shared how her food bank considered these equity-centered partner agency requirements alongside those required by external entities, stating:

> We have minimum standards that they have to meet. … They're not allowed to ever charge for food, they're not allowed obviously to discriminate, they're not allowed to require any action for somebody to get food. So, for example, you can't be a church-based food pantry and require somebody to go to your church to get food and things like that. You have to be open to the public, you have to publish your hours, and you need to be open for anybody. Many of our food pantries receive food through the USDA, and so they are required to use the eligibility requirements that the USDA requires. (Jennifer, 2021)

Jennifer characterized these as "minimum standards" that her food bank thought every partner agency should have, but most of the administrators did not enforce such standards. Using their own power in the private food assistance system was one way some food banks made their distribution to partner agencies align with creating systemic change, as they sought to change inequities in the system.

Food banks also implemented less-forceful ways to influence partner agencies. Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, stated:

> Well, what criteria did the pantry have? And in some cases, they would have, "Oh you gotta be in this neighborhood." Some cases they say, "You have to be below the poverty level and show it." More and more, we push them to just say, "Look, self-declared need

> is sufficient." It's a lot easier to prove you have money than to prove you don't. … So, we managed to get almost everybody to stop requiring that. (Scott, 2021)

Still, most administrators who recognized these issues did not use their power to require partner agencies to change these policies. Heather, vice president at a Feeding America food bank, said that they provided a range of best practice guidelines that included emphasizing client choice, not requiring documentation or identifying information from clients, and applying for grants (Heather, 2021). However, Heather stated, "Food pantries are pretty independent in their policies and procedures. Our guidelines are mostly centered around food safety and recall procedures and those sort of things" (Heather, 2021). This demonstrates food banks' reticence to require more from partner agencies than is demanded of them, even when they desired change.

Intentionally Developing In-Kind Food Distribution Networks. Networks of partner agencies typically developed through the initiative and capacity of partner agencies, which led to many networks that administrators described as having geographical disparities. Food banks were beginning to intentionally select, develop, and support partner agencies to fill geographic gaps in coverage and serve marginalized groups better. Ron, a Feeding America CEO, described how his organization had historically developed its network, and its new approach:

> We've never really targeted where we want to put pantries. We've kind of waited for church groups or whoever to come to us and say, "Hey, I'd like to partner with the food bank." Historically, that's what we've done. That's not really what we're doing now. We're really trying to be more strategic and say, "We've got a food desert here. We need to operate a couple of pantries right in this area, so who would be interested in doing that?" And we're getting much more proactive as opposed to reactive in terms of finding partners to distribute food. (Ron, 2021)

This shift to what Ron calls a proactive model of establishing food distributions represents recent changes to how some food banks are thinking about geographical inequities within their area. Beyond establishing new connections, some food banks are also investing in partner agencies that serve groups who have been historically disadvantaged. Jennifer, CEO of a

Feeding America food bank, highlighted their new initiative to provide grants to BIPOC-led and serving organizations, stating:

> [The grant] is just recognizing that many of these grassroots organizations—they're serving some of the most acute needs of food insecurity—and that they frequently do not receive the same kind of funding that organizations like [our food bank], a very long, well-established, very much a[n] all-white led organization tends to get. (Jennifer, 2021)

Such proactive approaches are the most common ways that food banks are shifting programs to address inequities in food access, creating greater alignment with the systemic change model. However, while some food banks are changing their approach to food redistribution to reflect their organizational values, in-kind food programs still cannot address the root causes of hunger.

Tying In-Kind Food Distributions to Nutrition and Medicalization: Personal Responsibility Model. Another way that food banks have built upon traditional in-kind food programs is emphasizing nutrition and health. The administrators described increasing attention on nutrition and health over the past two decades, themes that emerged during 92% of interviews. These values sometimes manifested in missions and programs that did not involve distributing food in-kind, but they frequently became part of food banks' in-kind food distribution programs through sourcing and distributing more nutritious foods and partnering with healthcare providers as partner agencies. These efforts occasionally intertwined in what are known as "food prescription programs." In Chapter 4, I detail how food banks assess the nutritional quality of the food they distribute, but here I discuss how they change the foods they distribute to be more nutritious, based on their own understanding of the term.

The nutritional quality of food that food banks are distributing changed in the 21st century as food banks emphasized nutrition as an essential value, donor interests changed, and

types of excess food that were most readily available shifted from manufactured food to produce and fresh foods (Deener, 2020; Fisher, 2017a; Martin, 2021; Poppendieck, 1998). As Nick detailed above when describing his mission, his food bank was focusing on sourcing more nutritious food, rather than just more food. Barbara, executive director of a nonprofit in the food bank sector, similarly highlighted how her nonprofit changed the food it provides, stating:

> Let's make sure we're giving them good, nutritious, healthy food that they're going to eat. And that's the big change. A can of SpaghettiOs was acceptable 20 years ago, and that's not acceptable any longer. (Barbara, 2021)

Many of the food banks had worked extensively to develop relationships with local farms, through both food-purchasing and farm-gleaning programs, to change the types of food they distribute, a trend evidenced in extant literature (Brinkley, 2017; Deener, 2020; Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Vitiello et al., 2015). Changes toward nutritional food also impacted how food banks conceive of their own roles as social service providers. The administrators described changes to the types of food they distributed as tied to a change in how they viewed their own organizations. Patricia, executive director of a Feeding America PDO food bank, said:

> We're shifting the way we look in-house anyway at quality of food, at nutrition security more than just what we get in terms of commodity foods, which sometimes isn't very good. So we're really trying to look at ourselves as a health provider…. Just because somebody can't afford food doesn't mean they shouldn't have access to quality food that's going to keep them well. (Patricia, 2021)

Patricia described how her organization now viewed itself as a health provider, not just a food assistance provider, echoing the historical processes discussed in the last chapter, in which social service provision has been medicalized and is reflective of the personal responsibility model. Food banks have also increasingly offered medicalized direct distribution programs in conjunction with healthcare providers as they sought to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health. Food banks are increasingly turning to healthcare providers as partner

agencies (Martin, 2021). Curtis, vice president of a Feeding America food bank, described how his food bank is expanding the types of organizations with which it works, beyond the traditional network of church pantries, stating that his food bank is:

> trying to find different groups, different outreach through not just the standard pantry network that we currently do. It doesn't have to be a church pantry. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. We're doing a lot more with the hospitals now. (Curtis, 2021)

Other administrators described how they were connecting with healthcare providers as partner agencies. William, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said that his food bank was distributing produce at 86% of hospitals in its service area (William, 2021). Some related programs also involve distributions to people considered deserving of assistance based on health status, drawing on traditional notions of serving those with disabilities. One example is Feeding San Diego's drive-through food distribution for patients with cancer (Casares, 2021). Some of these efforts focus only on partnering with healthcare providers, but others represent highly medicalized programs.

Medicalized programs are often called *food prescription* or *food as medicine* programs, reflecting concerted efforts to influence people's health through food assistance targeted to people with limited economic resources.[19] Such programs have received public and private funding because they economize spending by lowering public and private healthcare costs and improve health outcomes (Costanzo, 2023d, 2023e; Martin, 2021; National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2019; Task Force on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, 2022). Nearly one-third of organizations I interviewed operated a food prescription program. Justin, CEO of a Feeding America food bank that operated one, stated, "We position ourselves now as a low-cost,

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[19] Other common variants include Food Farmacy, Food RX, and Produce Prescriptions.

high-value healthcare strategy" (Justin, 2021). He advocated for greater public investment in both his own food bank and the SNAP program as forms of "good public health policy" (Justin, 2021). This approach frames hunger as an economic cost for health insurance providers.

Food prescription programs have also been tied to diet-related diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension, as public attention has increasingly focused on them as public health crises (Martin, 2021; Task Force on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, 2022). Some programs focus only on produce, but others are working to provide medically tailored food to low-income patients' specific dietary needs (Costanzo, 2023b). Jerry, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said that his food bank works with a health clinic so that when a low-income person with a diet-related disease is discharged, "they are given a food prescription to go to any one of these pantries, and they will be guaranteed 100% healthy food for a period of time" (Jerry, 2021). During interviews and in online promotion materials for these programs, food banks that operate these programs often highlighted the organization's role in preventing adverse health outcomes. However, these programs still provided in-kind food assistance, rather than addressing the material hardships that made it difficult for patients to obtain these resources on their own. Such health-based programs aligned with historical narratives that medicalize poverty (see Chapter 2) and the contemporary trends that invoke racialized narratives to frame poor health as an outcome of poor nutritional choices (Biltekoff, 2013; Carney, 2015b; Guthman, 2011).

Programs Beyond Food Distribution

In-kind food distribution was central to the work at all of the food banks in this study, but every organization in my interview sample also had programs that lay outside the scope of in-kind food provision. For most, programs were conceived as part of their food bank work. However, seven of the organizations engaged in broader work related to poverty, most often

Community Action Agencies formed in response to the War on Poverty, in which case running a food bank was only one of many programs. At some food banks, non-in-kind food programs represented further efforts to alleviate symptoms of hunger and poverty through the provision of other types of in-kind, voucher, or cash-based resources. Many also supported and augmented access to government social safety net programs. When food banks sought to end rather than simply alleviate hunger, they took on new approaches that addressed what they characterized as root causes of hunger, which promoted personal responsibility or systemic change. Administrators argued that such approaches were necessary due to the failure of the traditional model, rooted in charitable assistance, to solve the problem of hunger and address their missions. Food banks thus increasingly adopted programs beyond their historical roles in the social safety net, including those that targeted individualized conceptions of poverty's root causes and that focused on systemic change.

Providing Resources Beyond In-kind Food

Food banks in my sample often provided people and organizations with more in-kind items than just food items, such as other consumable goods. Some had special programs devoted to other necessary items such as diapers or clothes, and still others provided non-food items such as paper towels and personal hygiene products alongside food. Some even moved away from providing in-kind goods, instead providing vouchers, gift cards, and cash.

Other In-Kind Goods. All of the administrators were aware that the people who were accessing food bank programs had material needs beyond food, and some hoped that by providing people with food, they could lessen financial strain on other parts of their budgets. Keith, a Feeding America PDO executive director, wished that more people who were struggling financially would use his food bank, stating, "They should be availing themselves of our food;

they could be saving $400 to 500 a month by coming to our food distributions" (Keith, 2021). Keith's food bank predominately operated in-kind food programs, but it occasionally provided other consumable items like toiletries and paper towels. Other food banks deliberately used their in-kind food distribution networks to provide other goods.

Seven of the food banks had specific programs for distributing diapers, an increasingly common type of program called a *diaper bank* that addresses shortcomings in the existing social safety net, either as a standalone organization or part of another social service organization (Randles, 2017, 2021). Daycare programs require disposable diapers, and laundromats ban washing cloth diapers, making diapers a constant expense for parents in poverty (Randles, 2021). Since federal social safety net programs have shifted away from cash, parents must cover diaper costs through other means. Neither SNAP nor WIC can be used to buy diapers, leading parents, generally mothers, and nonprofits to fill the gaps (Randles, 2021). Procuring diapers deviates from food banks' historical roots in gleaning excess food, since diapers must be sourced new and they do not spoil like food. However, the program still fits within the traditional charity model.

Four of the food banks also provided pet food. While searching for food banks in building my Food Bank Census (see Chapter 6 and Methodological Appendix), I identified several organizations that were exclusively pet food banks, redistributing pet food to other nonprofits. Discussing why he targets programs to serve the elderly, Dale, an independent food bank executive director, explained how he tries to make sure that they are supplied with pet food:

> Where they're not feeding their pet food they would eat because first of all, it's not good for the pet. And we can get them pet food that gets donated to us, too. So, we can feed their pet and feed them…. I can't see elderly people making decisions between food and medicine. That's just unconscionable to me. (Dale, 2022)

He framed his food bank's pet food distribution as a moral obligation, particularly to help older adults. In the moral constructions of people experiencing poverty, pets occupy a space that straddles conceptions of deservingness. People often criticize those in poverty for being pet owners, but people more regularly supply pet food to people experiencing homelessness than food for humans (Arluke & Rowan, 2020; Irvine et al., 2012). Dale spoke of pet food programs, particularly in the context of a group considered deserving, tying the program to traditional notions of charity and poverty alleviation.

Most food banks only provided consumable in-kind goods that people must constantly procure, but a few were venturing into longer-term investments. Two administrators at Community Action Agencies said that their organizations also provided weatherization programs. Such programs help low-income households reduce utility costs by sealing cracks and improving insulation in their homes. Some food banking organizations operated shelter programs for people experiencing homelessness. The San Antonio Food Bank took on a different form of housing initiative by building affordable apartments that it plans to offer at 25% less than market rates, alongside child care (Costanzo, 2021c). Such in-kind contributions that lower families' typical fixed costs align with the personal responsibility model. These programs are likely to have longer-term impacts on families and their financial situations, but they still address poverty at the individual household level.

Providing Financial Resources. The food bank administrators I interviewed spoke of increasingly working to distribute financial resources in addition to, or in place of, in-kind food assistance. One-fifth of the organizations had programs that provided earmarked assistance for expenses besides food, such as rent or utilities. A smaller group was also starting to provide gift cards for groceries in place of in-kind food. Administrators who operated rental and utility

assistance programs framed such programs as alleviating the same financial strains that cause hunger. Megan, manager at a Feeding America PDO food bank, said that utility assistance fits into food insecurity work because "With families that are fighting food insecurity, having a flexible budget is one of the best ways they can stave off hunger" (Megan, 2022). Programs like this were more common at Community Action Agencies. Most organizations that had similar programs were independent of Feeding America, despite my sample including more Feeding America than independent food banks.

Another program variant provided financial resources through grocery gift cards. It was largely driven by food bank administrators reflecting on what it means for them to purchase food.[20] Some recognized the paternalism of using resources to purchase food to be distributed in-kind, and they were creating new programs to provide people with cash or grocery gift cards with the new revenue they obtained during the pandemic. In a Food Bank News article, Brian Greene, CEO of Houston Food Bank, argued that this programmatic shift toward giving clients agency and more valuable support is a better use of food bank resources than exercising food banks' slightly improved buying power:

> Food banks are in the leverage business. We're the ones who can take a dollar and turn it into many dollars' worth of assistance. In addition to environmental benefits, the fundamental value of food banks is providing far more food for every dollar spent.
>
> But not when we buy food. The food industry is a low-margin business. Sure, we can buy food a little cheaper than the neighbors we serve, but only marginally. If purchasing is the only option, the families would be far better served if we gave them gift cards so they could buy what they need rather than what other people think they need. Purchasing food is the worst way for us to invest dollars. (Greene, 2023, paras. 10−11)

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[20] A few food banks also distributed gift cards as part of disaster response, perhaps reflecting large influxes of resources after a disaster, or less paternalism toward disaster victims.

This reflects a shift away from in-kind food distribution toward improving clients' economic situation. Providing households with cash assistance reduces their economic insecurity, rather than just food insecurity. However, food banks still typically provide earmarked money in the form of grocery gift cards.

Seven administrators discussed programs in which they acquired grocery gift cards to redistribute to clients, two of which were implemented in response to natural disasters. Several such programs sought to address the production of the food system by targeting specific types of food retailers. Two food banks purchased gift cards from local BIPOC-owned grocery stores, and one purchased vouchers to be used with local farmers at farmers markets. Administrators viewed this as a double investment in households that received gift cards and in redistributing resources to business owners who had been marginalized in the food system. Shawn, an independent food bank CEO, explained the benefits of this program:

> We are getting grocery vouchers from small BIPOC-led grocers or food producers, and we're distributing those to families in which that grocer or producer is culturally significant. So, for instance, Halal butchers or Central American bakeries. These are small businesses led by BIPOC people. And they tend to serve people groups that experience food insecurity at a disproportionately high rate. (Shawn, 2021)

He characterized this program in values of addressing systemic inequities in those who experience food insecurity, while supporting small businesses in a population that also has high food insecurity. Shawn's food bank started the program during the pandemic, a time when food banks experienced an influx of cash in addition to in-kind donations. While several administrators reported a preference for distributing gift cards as cash assistance, this was not the norm. Only a minority of food banks had cash, gift card, and voucher-based programs.

In fact, some administrators went to great lengths to provide food in-kind. Tiffany, a vice president at a Feeding America food bank, reported that her food bank used gift cards donated

during the pandemic to compensate people for preparing meals that were then passed out to clients, explaining:

> They had $100 gift cards, and they gave them to us…. And so we reached out to restaurants, and we said, "Hey, we've got these gift cards that we can technically pay your staff if you all can prepare meals that we can then distribute to communities that are in need." So, we did this great partnership…. About eight restaurants, producing meals almost every single day. We would partner with our partner agencies. All you had to do was heat them up. They were cooked, and these were meals prepared by [high-end] chefs [and restaurants.] So, we were able to help out their staff and keep their staff employed, and at the same time provide meals to those that we serve. (Tiffany, 2022)

The program lasted for several months during the pandemic, and Tiffany heralded it as a great benefit to the community that allowed her food bank to help sustain the hospitality industry (Tiffany, 2022). The approach represents a counter-example to programs that provide cash (or near cash) assistance, seeking to implement work-arounds to continue to provide in-kind food.

In general, as food banks provided other resources besides food, they recognized how the problem of hunger related with other experiences of material hardship. Such programs provided more dignity and met a broader variety of needs for people experiencing material hardship, but they still did not ultimately work to address the root causes of hunger. The programs provided more holistic poverty alleviation. As food banks sought to not only meet people's needs but reduce the number of people who needed their services, they turned to other programs.

Supporting the Public Social Safety Net

Food bank administrators commonly referred to their work as both getting people food immediately and building strategies for long-term food access. They also referred to intentions of feeding people both today and tomorrow. Troy, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said:

> Once we get people food, we work on our Food for Tomorrow strategies, which is about accessing public benefits like SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, TANF, long-term care, the

> children's health insurance programs, utility assistance programs that are available to low-income families that oftentimes go underutilized because of stigma or lack of knowledge or just the process of applying is too difficult. (Troy, 2021)

Like many other administrators, Troy viewed the public social safety net as more sustainable than food bank resources, but he recognized that many people experience difficulties navigating the burdensome public safety net. Most of the food banking organizations in my sample (88%) highlighted programs that helped connect people to the public social safety net. However, most administrators remained dissatisfied with the structures of these programs. For this reason, 91% of food banks in my sample were also involved in advocacy for food-based and other public social safety net programs, which I explore further in Chapter 5. Here, I explore how food banks engage in considerable work to connect people with public social safety net programs such as SNAP, Medicare, and WIC. SNAP outreach was the most popular of these, occurring in 80% of food banks in my sample. The administrators highlighted their SNAP engagement as a connection to a public program that was available broadly, in comparison to other non-food programs (e.g., Medicare) and food programs with age and gender limitations (e.g., WIC).

Although SNAP is a federal program, its rollout varies across states. To qualify, households must have a gross income of less than 130% of the federal poverty line, and meet other, often age-based, criteria tied to income, assets, deductions, and job requirements (Wilkerson et al., 2018). Each state determines these criteria, in addition to the process to continue receiving benefits (Wilkerson et al., 2018). Beyond having uneven eligibility requirements, states vary significantly regarding the percentage of eligible residents who access SNAP (Cunningham, 2023). Nationally, 78% of eligible people received SNAP during 2020 (Cunningham, 2023). In 38 states and the District of Columbia, SNAP participation rates were significantly different, either higher or lower, than the national average. In six states (New

Mexico, Rhode Island, Oregon, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts) estimated SNAP participation was 100%, but other states had much lower rates, such as Wyoming (49%), Mississippi (62%), Arkansas (62%), Kentucky (65%), North Dakota (66%), and California (66%) (Cunningham, 2023). Such variation suggests that some states are better at managing SNAP enrollment through public and nonprofit programs, while others have considerable gaps. Many food banks thus found that connecting people with SNAP was valuable to their missions. Although many did connect people in need to public programs, the need for such programs highlights the inefficiencies of public programs and how administrative burdens in the social safety net lead to inequitable experiences (Ray et al., 2023). Geographic inequities are also heightened since only some food banks offer connections to these programs.

When discussing programs to support public social safety nets, the administrators underscored that public programs such as SNAP could provide more assistance with more dignity than their own programming. This contradicts the common narrative among U.S. conservatives that welfare policies should be reduced, and that private religious and nonprofit organizations can meet demand. Food Bank News reports that 82% of the top 101 largest food banks include information on enrolling in SNAP on their websites (Food Bank News, 2022). Emphasizing the efficacy of SNAP, Frank, CEO of a Feeding America food bank, claimed, "The quickest way to get the most amount of food into people's hands, even if it's just supplemental, is to help set them up with [SNAP]" (Frank, 2021). Sandra, executive director of a nonprofit that works in food banking, similarly emphasized the importance of food banks advocating for SNAP, based on the dignity it provides in comparison to the private food assistance system. She said advocating for SNAP is important because it can:

> bring down the demand in [food banks'] communities by giving everyone the opportunity to participate in the food system that's out there already—it's called grocery stores. You don't have to go to this church basement, go down the stairs to some dark little place, and get some cans of food. You can use your card and go to the store and buy fruits and veggies like everybody else. (Sandra, 2021)

Sandra and other administrators promoted the dignity of SNAP, allowing people to shop in grocery stores, but the administrators remained aware of the stigma of accessing safety net programs that has been heightened by narratives of dependence versus self-sufficiency.

Recognizing the effectiveness and dignity provided by SNAP, 80% of the food banks in my sample worked to connect people to it. Three-fourths of these food banks had formal, dedicated SNAP outreach programs and staff members to increase enrollment, but one-fourth took only an informal approach. Informal approaches were evidenced in general efforts to increase clients' knowledge of SNAP by distributing fliers and including information and links to applications on websites. Janice, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said that her food bank had to use informal means because the state did not allow online applications (Janice, 2021). Some food banks also used informal approaches by partnering with local organizations and state food bank associations that operate SNAP outreach programs, creating bridges to these services. A couple of food banks became involved with SNAP retailing. One food bank was a SNAP retailer, and another facilitated half-price farm Community Supported Agriculture box purchases for clients with SNAP benefits.

Although some administrators criticized SNAP's limitations, they still implemented enrollment programs. Cheryl, a Feeding America food bank executive director, reported that her food bank had just restarted in-person SNAP signups, conducted by a staff member alongside their mobile food distributions. Cheryl nevertheless criticized the program, stating, "I'm not a big fan of SNAP, quite frankly, because I think it needs to be updated and restructured" (Cheryl,

2021). She did not like the program because it does not provide sufficient food for people to eat healthily, but that pandemic expansions made the program more worthwhile. She said:

> It doesn't give the clients enough funding to really make a difference. I mean, what's $15 a week, right? When you're trying to purchase healthy product? So, not a big fan of that. Now, they're getting $30 a week. So at least that's sufficient enough to hopefully get them on some healthy eating habits. (Cheryl, 2021)

Cheryl viewed expanded SNAP benefits as making signups worth her staff's time, but she did not believe that the earlier program could establish "clients' healthy eating habits," a measure she used to assess the program.

Outreach programs typically involved paid staff members who could help people enroll in SNAP by letting them know they are eligible, helping them navigate bureaucratic paperwork and documentation requirements, assisting with technology, bridging language barriers, and building trust with communities. Frank outlined his food banks' formal SNAP outreach program as including informational outreach paired with application assistance by trained food bank staff:

> In every box of food that goes out from us, there's a [SNAP] flyer. There's instructions to call one of our agency people or one of our staff people, and we will walk you through the [SNAP] process…. Where there's struggles, we'll help you get through, and then we also work with county and state officials to say, "In some cases, it's too difficult for some of these people to…get through and verify their documentation." (Frank, 2021)

Frank discussed how his food bank's work on SNAP enrollment led to its advocacy regarding bureaucratic and administrative barriers to program access. His food bank viewed expanding its SNAP outreach program as a priority (Frank, 2021). Tracy, vice president at a Feeding America food bank, reported that her food bank's SNAP outreach program was one of her organization's most direct connections with clients, allowing them to obtain client input. She highlighted that people in the community who were experiencing hunger have valuable, detailed knowledge of how programs like SNAP work (Tracy, 2021). She highlighted clients' detailed knowledge and experiences with barriers, such as an uncooperative social services employee

who works Tuesdays, phone calls being unavailable in clients' languages, and a door that gets blocked at the state office (Tracy, 2021). Tracy's food bank is using such feedback to shape policy advocacy, similar to Frank's, which aligns with the systemic change model.

After completing about one-third of the interviews, I added a question that asked whether and how people viewed their organization as empowering clients. More than 15% of the administrators viewed enrolling clients in SNAP and other social safety net programs as a form of client empowerment. Tiffany, a Feeding America food bank vice president, described her food bank's efforts to empower clients through SNAP, stating:

> We also empower through the SNAP benefits program and how people can utilize that, stretch those dollars if they do have additional funds, how they should spend that at the grocery store. And a lot of people just don't know a healthier way to eat. (Tiffany, 2022)

Tiffany claimed that her food bank empowered people by teaching them "how they should spend" their funds to eat healthier. This incorporates components of the personal responsibility model that emphasizes nutrition education to build better individual-level habits as a solution to address hunger. When asked how her Feeding America food bank's work empowers clients, Brenda said:

> A lot of the work comes from the direct one-on-one relationship. Using that SNAP example again, our associates are also trained to help and go through any other [state application]. … We make sure that we can help them along the process. And really, the word "empowering" is so appropriate because typically, after they go through it once, they feel empowered to go and do that the next time on their own…. So it really builds confidence in how to provide proper documentation and maybe get over the fear of what you have to provide for those type of applications. (Brenda, 2021)

Brenda perceives her food bank's programming that signs people up for SNAP and other social safety net programs as empowering because it helps people become self-sufficient at navigating the social safety net. This narrative drew on individualized conceptions of empowerment by helping individuals learn to navigate the system and build self-sufficiency,

while grounding the goal of empowerment in increasing access to public social safety net support, reflecting aspects of both the personal responsibility and systemic change models.

SNAP outreach programs run by food banks benefitted both government and corporations. The administrators spoke of how their local and state governments provided funding to them to run SNAP outreach programs. Highlighting how his food bank alleviates demand on government administration, Raymond, a Feeding America food bank CEO, said, "We would make the case that we are underwriting or picking up a whole lot of service responsibility that would otherwise be on the shoulders of the local, state, or county municipalities; therefore, they ought to support us more" (Raymond, 2021). Several administrators even highlighted that SNAP outreach and advocacy were complementary to the interests of many of their corporate donors. Craig, a Feeding America food bank CEO, reported that beyond providing more food to people than private food assistance is able to do, SNAP also "puts money back into the economy" (Craig, 2021). Lauren, a Feeding America food bank CEO, emphasized the economic multiplier of each SNAP dollar spent in her community as a way to get conservative donors onboard with her food bank's SNAP work, even when donors "don't think that government assistance programs should exist" (Lauren, 2021). Justin, a Feeding America food bank CEO, explained how corporations help with SNAP lobbying for their own benefit, stating, "The food industry trusts us…they help lobbying on all the USDA issues—big lobbying on SNAP" (Justin, 2021). However, one food bank's executive director said his food bank was unable to secure money to fund a formal SNAP outreach program. Many food banks nevertheless secured funding to support the program because it benefitted both the government and food retailers.

“Root Cause” Programs of Personal Responsibility

Many food banks operated programs they said were designed to end poverty or its root causes. The programs that administrators described as “root cause” work fell into two categories—individualized programmatic solutions that used the personal responsibility model, and political economic programmatic solutions that reflected the systemic change model—representing two types of programs that food banks commonly operated simultaneously.

The personal responsibility model programs were often education-focused, including job training and nutrition, cooking, budgeting, and gardening classes. Although community members of all social classes might enjoy and find value in classes on these topics, the programs were typically characterized as solutions to poverty, rather than added community resources. Food banks did not simply offer these programs as community events that targeted people of all social classes. Instead, they targeted people who were experiencing poverty. The administrators reported that such programs were part of their “root cause” work, claiming that by educating people to develop better habits, they were ending hunger. By drawing this causal connection between the supposed shortcomings of people in poverty and their experiences of hunger, food banks suggested that people were themselves at fault for their own circumstances. Such educative programs invoke a paternalistic ideology, suggesting that “if people only knew,” they would make better choices, an ideology that is often racialized (Carney, 2015b; De Souza, 2019; Guthman, 2008). Furthermore, any impact on poverty and hunger that these programs have is limited to the individuals and households that participate, rather than addressing the structural forces that led 1 in 8 households to experience food insecurity. When a farmworker or fast food employee secures a higher-paying job, someone else takes their place in the low-paying job and

also experiences poverty if unlivable wages are allowed and a weak social safety net persists (Rank, 2023).

Drawing from the interviews and public promotional materials, food banks framed these individualized educational programs as solutions that could end hunger and poverty by addressing "root causes." For example, Jerry, CEO of a Feeding America food bank, described some of his food bank's work that was part of a strategy to address one of hunger's root causes—jobs/income—stating:

> A lot of people still unemployed, a lot of qualified people out there that just need the proper environment and on-ramps to jobs. So, we have created a culinary training and job placement program where low-income and homeless people come into the program…. They are taught in our community kitchen by professional chefs everything about the culinary trade, and then a parallel track of life skill training. And those are the things of: How do you write a resume? How do you conduct yourself in a job interview? How do you open a bank account? How do you work as a productive team member in a busy kitchen? And on and on and on. And we find those life skills are really the secret sauce to our program. We have graduated [hundreds of] students to date, have 100% job placement rate at a decent wage, and many of them are getting raises and advancing in their careers…. So they then are able to put food on their table. (Jerry, 2021)

Jerry recognized jobs and low income as root causes of hunger, but his food bank takes an individual approach to addressing these issues. Participants are offered training and job placement. Through the life skills training, the food bank assumes that the "low-income and homeless people" who participate do not know how to conduct themselves in an interview, open a bank account, and be productive team members. These point to assumed individual faults rather than recognizing the failure of employers to pay a wage that can supply life's necessities. Jerry claims that the program's graduates receive a "decent wage," but food system workers are commonly not paid a living wage (Dickinson, 2020; Lo & Koenig, 2017). When I questioned Jerry further on what constitutes a "decent wage," his answer was concerningly low, below the

region's legal minimum wage, and far below a living wage (Jerry, 2021).[21] This reflected his lack of understanding of the structural constraints of surviving on a low income. The food bank's achievement of securing jobs that pay a "decent wage" to all graduates was less impressive in this context. Jerry's food bank offered better pay and benefits to its own staff members, but the amount was still lower than a living wage in the area for a single adult with no children.

Job training programs like Jerry's were common. More than 20% of organizations operated similar programs in-house, and nine additional administrators characterized job training programs run by other organizations as a means of addressing the root causes of hunger. These programs typically trained people to contribute to the food bank's own operations in food service and warehouse work, both of which are low-paying industries. When advancing programs that develop individual skills, food banks ignore systemic forces that lead people to experience poverty. Even if food banks trained clients to work in high-paying jobs, raising income for a few does not address the exploitation in essential, low-wage jobs that do not pay enough for people to subsist without support from the government and nonprofits.

Jerry's food bank incorporated budgeting and life skills classes into its job training program, and eleven other food banks in my sample operated such classes as standalone programs or along with others. As part of San Antonio Food Bank's mission to create affordable housing, it planned to set aside a portion of rent payments in savings accounts for families (Costanzo, 2021c). The food bank planned to then have case managers "work with families to identify how best to use the funds, such as for debt reduction, education or other housing"

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[21] Minimum wage thresholds for non-tipped/exempt employees based on local laws were used. Living wage was assessed by using the Internet Archive to access the MIT Living Wage Calculator for the year during which the interview was conducted.

(Costanzo, 2021c, para. 5). This program seeks to build self-sufficiency through savings account contributions from residents' rent payments. Several budgeting classes described in interviews were tied with cooking programs, during which food banks taught people who were experiencing poverty "how to shop on a budget," often emphasizing nutritious food.

In recent years, food banks have also turned to health and nutrition (Carney, 2015b; Costanzo, 2023a). Most early research on food banking came from nutrition and public health fields, emphasizing the often lacking nutritional value of food from food banks (McIntyre et al., 2016). Many food banks now employ people from nutrition and public health fields. The topics of nutrition and health came up during more than 90% of the interviews. Nutrition and cooking classes were common programs that food bank administrators said addressed hunger's root causes. Nutrition education or cooking classes were offered at 70% of organizations in my sample. Crystal described her Feeding America food bank's programs that went beyond distributing food assistance to address food insecurity and hunger. She first discussed her food bank's SNAP outreach, but then described a very individualistic set of programs, stating,

> The other way would be through our nutrition education, nutrition services team. They are actually not just trying to feed, but they're trying to end the cycle of poverty by teaching people how to prepare healthy food, teaching people how to use the food that they're getting at distributions, and then our gardener, our on-site garden coordinator, is teaching them how to grow sustainable food. (Crystal, 2021)

She drew on discourse on the cycle of poverty, which is often based on problematic framings of poverty as cultural. She suggests that poverty can be ended by teaching people how to cook and garden, overlooking questions about time availability and access to food, land, and kitchens. Other administrators also suggested clients' lack of cooking and budgeting skills to be "root causes" of hunger. When I asked Debra how a cooking program fit into her organization's

mission, she detailed how she believed that teaching people how to cook and eat healthier impacts the root causes of hunger, stating:

> You've probably heard the term root cause work. That's considered in that category where maybe you're teaching somebody…. A bag of two pounds of beans is a lot cheaper than going to a convenience mart or a fast-food restaurant. And just really trying to provide education around budgeting and saving your limited dollars and eating healthier. I mean, eating healthier is a big part of our mission as well…. I had observed some of those in-person cooking…classes. And there was one class where the young adult, she was an adult, but I think she did live with her mom. They shared housing together. And, one of the weeks, the course was about knife skills, using a knife, cutting vegetables…. And this young lady was very fearful of using a knife. She had never been taught how to use a knife, was very afraid of using a knife, didn't really do that in her home. So that just to me was a real eye-opener about how, what sometimes we take for granted, I think, and how we can, involve people in learning those basic skills and eating better and budgeting better and those kind of things. So that's kind of what it boils down to. (Debra, 2021)

She shared an anecdote of how someone became more confident with knife skills. Although cooking skills are useful to anyone, regardless of social class, the suggestion that a young adult's lack of knife skills is a root cause of food insecurity is unfounded. This approach is paternalistic, suggesting that people are experiencing food insecurity due to insufficient cooking and budgeting knowledge, rather than limited access to resources. When food banks suggest that cooking and nutrition classes represent "root cause work," they suggest to donors and the public that food insecurity is a personal failing, not a systemic issue.

Food banks also offered support for clients to garden, farm, and be food entrepreneurs. In some cases, such programs could work to redistribute resources to overcome systemic inequities regarding land access and capital, but these solutions were still relatively individualized, since they enabled participants to improve only their own conditions. Kevin detailed how his food bank addresses root causes through both education programs and investing in food entrepreneurship, stating:

> We're really trying to go after the root causes of food insecurity and food health. And so that will look like nutrition education; it will look like food production, so can you grow your own food at your home garden, your community garden, your school garden. Can you use that food, and is it just fresh foodstuff, or do you process that food? So people who want to become food entrepreneurs, we provide micro-loans, we do farmers markets, we do community kitchen where people can produce food for their families and for others, so anything food-related that is not just handing out food but might be growing food and making a living from food we're involved in that. (Kevin, 2021)

Kevin outlined his food bank's work in nutrition education and gardening instruction as part of root cause work, and he included his food bank's work in providing financial and infrastructural support to food entrepreneurs. In comparison to other individual solutions to hunger, gardening and farming classes can promote food sovereignty and enable people to produce their own food. However, the solution still encourages individual self-sufficiency, rather than changes to systemic causes of inequality. Growing food is not itself a viable solution to ending hunger in an urbanized society. Kevin's food bank further sought to address systemic inequities regarding land access and capital to support marginalized communities, but this was not the case at many food banks. These programs did some work to create systemic changes to the food system, but they did not fully address the systemic inequities that lead to hunger.

Root Cause Programs for Systemic Change

Food banks' approaches to creating systemic change in support of food security either influenced public social safety net policies or reflected broader efforts to achieve food and social justice. Seeking to address root causes, their programs sought to create systemic change, aligning with research on the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. Food bank administrators typically described programs that targeted structural root causes of poverty as recent developments that had been operating for fewer than five years, with many programs beginning after 2020. Due to that newness, the programs were more heterogeneous than programs that

focused on individual root causes. Advocacy for public policy was also a common way food banks addressed the structural root causes of poverty. In Chapter 5, I detail food banks' political advocacy to create systemic changes. Here, I focus only on programs that sought to address structural inequities and advance social justice, describing and characterizing ideological aspects of these programs.

As evidenced in my interviews, food banks have begun to initiate programs that align with the tenets of food justice and broader social justice movements. Topics of food, race, and social justice came up in 37% of interviews, suggesting that a sizable minority were thinking about these issues. Some administrators only mentioned these topics, but others had worked to put these principles into practice. Food and social justice-oriented programs, beyond political advocacy, that targeted systemic root causes of hunger included programs for living wages, redistributing power to marginalized groups, and advancing the right to food. In comparison to other programming, these initiatives tended to focus on internal practices to create systemic change, which were then accompanied with external political advocacy efforts. Food banks thus addressed systemic inequities that led to food insecurity by raising wages and building political power among people who were experiencing food insecurity. The programs included working with clients in new ways and advocating for systemic change at the political level.

Recognizing the exploitation that capitalism perpetuates, the administrators pointed to employers' failure to pay living wages, a topic that emerged in one-quarter of the interviews. Justin, a Feeding America food bank CEO, explained how his food bank got involved in advocating living wages, stating:

> Matthew Desmond's work around Evicted showed the 45-year gap in productivity and profitability and wages.… It's happened [ever] since the '80s, and so going into those kind of root cause conversations, we were the first. I said, "We got to do it ourselves" to

> the board. I said, "I don't have the moral imperative to tell everybody else to do it if we don't do it." So, we did it, and first year we saved money, and then I taught a bunch of other nonprofits because you're saving turnover costs, you're saving training costs that eventually levels out. (Justin, 2021)

Justin cited Desmond (2016) to highlight the political economic changes that increased inequality during the past 40 years. He highlighted his food bank's internal initiative to raise the wages, followed by encouraging other organizations to do the same. Administrators from five organizations mentioned similar internal policies to pay a living wage, and three others discussed advocating for living wage policies.

In news articles on food banks, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma recently implemented an internal living wage. In a press release, Stacy Dykstra, CEO of the food bank, stated, "Underemployment, not making enough money to make ends meet, is an underlying cause of hunger and poverty. Our work to prevent hunger begins within our own organization" (Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, 2022, para. 3). The food bank enacted a living wage policy in January 2022 that raised all permanent employees' wages to at least $18.47 an hour. Prior to the change, 74 employees, or over half of the food bank's staff, were not earning a living wage (Costanzo, 2022b). Such efforts exemplify how food banks are working to create systemic changes to raise people's income, which is highly associated with food insecurity. They also work to make their organizations more inclusive and provide better support for staff members who might otherwise be food insecure.

Nearly 30% of the administrators discussed efforts to change power dynamics, including shifting decision-making to current clients and other people with experiences of hunger as well as building political power among people using their programs. Sharon, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described her food bank's work in doing both, stating:

> We have part of [a] team that is focused on client engagement and civic engagement, and this work is just beginning. And our effort is both internal and external. In our current strategic plan, we've set a target of ensuring that all our teams and programs… have strong mechanisms in place to be informed by people experiencing hunger. (Sharon, 2021)

Sharon described empowering clients to take decision-making roles in the food bank, and she discussed plans to spread these practices to partner agencies (Sharon, 2021). Kevin characterized his food bank's work of building political power as part of food justice, saying:

> Food justice is…also related to power. Do I have the political power that my family, my household, and my neighborhood needs to shape its own destiny, its own economic socio-economic destiny? And that's how we've gotten involved in community organizing… Underlying our public policy work [on increasing the minimum wage] is we have community organizers, and so the food justice perspective is much broader than just food security. It's related to economic security, and it's related to political power and community. (Kevin, 2021)

He highlighted that the food bank is working to change power dynamics in the broader community and thus build political power that supports food justice, which means advocating increases to the minimum wage. He framed community-organizing work as part of a goal to achieve social justice. Other food bank administrators described changing power relations by including people who have experienced hunger during decision-making, developing programs to train them to engage with policymakers, and creating initiatives that support diversity, equity, and inclusion in their organizations.

Although the right to food has been a focus among researchers who study food banks (Dickinson, 2019; Lohnes, 2023; Lohnes & Pine, 2023; Riches, 2018; Spring et al., 2022), the approach was uncommon in interviews with food bank administrators. Thirteen administrators referenced the right to food, but only two described efforts to achieve it. Nick was one who mentioned the right to food, but his organization did not pursue it with a program. He stated:

> The reason [my food bank] exists is because food is not seen as a human right…. The food system is commodified and is for profit, not for feeding people. That's why we

> waste 40% of food, and that's why we have to have food rescue organizations that serve food pantries and meal sites…. It’s capitalism, and the inefficiency is the dysfunction, the exploitation that comes out of that that affects marginalized groups. (Nick, 2021)

Nick did not have programs that addressed this, but he clearly framed lack of a right to food as a root cause of hunger. Efforts to advance the right to food at food banks have manifested as combinations of education about food as a right and policy advocacy (Bryniarski, 2021). Maine was the first state to enact Right to Food legislation in November of 2021 (Whittle, 2021), though it was not an initiative of Maine’s Feeding America food bank (Bryniarski, 2021).

Programs that addressed root causes of hunger that align with the systemic change model were less common than programs that addressed individual root causes. Structural root cause programs did appear to be growing, evidenced by many such programs being in pilot stages. The administrators pointed to structural root causes and social justice as new areas of development. Sharon, a Feeding America CEO who had been in food banking for more than two decades, said:

> As we think about ways to effectively address hunger, there have been kind of three movements in the US. There has been the charitable hunger response, and that's what I would kind of call traditional food banking. There's more of a food systems approach where advocates and actors are really working to build a more healthy, local, sustainable food system that provides both access and affordability to nutritious, culturally appropriate foods to folks at every socioeconomic level and all neighborhoods. And then there's a food justice approach, which really sees food as a basic human right and views all issues of equity and social justice as part of the equation that must be present in order to effectively address hunger. (Sharon, 2021)

These programs and associated political advocacy framed hunger as a structural issue that must be resolved at the collective level. By framing the root causes of hunger as structural, programs moved away from placing blame for poverty on those experiencing it. However, such programs were also quite different from food banking’s historical roots in redistributing food waste and providing charity. The administrators had to deal with these tensions as they tried to implement these programs.

Discussion: Dealing with Contradictory Models of Food Banking

Contemporary food banks are operating under a mixed approach that reflects disparate trends in the historical evolution of food banking. Most food banks' missions aligned with multiple models of food banking (see Figure 3.1), and most were administering programs that aligned with multiple models. All of the food banks in my sample supplied food in-kind, which aligns with the traditional charity model and food banks' historical emphasis on food waste. Some state food bank associations did not supply food in-kind, but directly supported food banks in their efforts to do so. Most organizations in my sample (80%) had programs for cooking/nutrition education, budgeting/life skills classes, or job training, all of which fit in the personal responsibility model. More than half of organizations in my sample (52%) had a program that aligned with the systemic change model in the form of redistributing power and resources to historically marginalized groups, setting up relationships with BIPOC-led organizations, advancing living wages, and working on establishing the right to food. Demonstrating overlap between the personal responsibility and systemic change models, nearly one-third of the organizations (32%) had programming in both categories. Such overlap is based on the coexistence of programs that addressed root causes of hunger in different ways. Many of the programs described here also aligned with multiple models themselves, such as programming for the "deserving" poor and those that connected people to the public social safety net. Thus, food banks and their administrators were engaged in work that straddled the three models of food banking. I argue that food banks' implementation of multiple models reflects contradictions between their historical legacies and more recent goals of ending hunger and poverty. Food banks were beginning to adopt programs that corresponded with new missions that focused on ending the root causes of hunger, but operations still reflected an organizational legacy that

emphasized food waste. The food banks continued to reflect their gleaning roots while trying to pivot toward solving the problem of hunger.

Collecting and redistributing food at scale requires significant capital in the form of warehouses, forklifts, and trucks. During the early 21st century, food banks increasingly focused on distributing produce and other perishable products, which required further investment in temperature-controlled storage and transportation. Food banks typically operated similarly to wholesalers and distributors, occupying vast warehouses with growing temperature-controlled spaces, and operating fleets of refrigerated vehicles. These operations were overseen and carried out by supply chain managers, warehouse staff, and truck drivers. This physical infrastructure, and its corresponding personnel, imposed a particular orientation on how food banks provided resources to meet people's immediate needs. As food banks fundraise for new warehouse space, they become increasingly locked into current modes of operation through sunk costs.

Not all food banks operated the same programs, but most of the programs discussed were also in operation at other organizations. These programs followed trends in food banking that aligned most commonly with the traditional charity model, then the personal responsibility model, and lastly with the systemic change model. Food bank programs were replicated as administrators met regularly at conferences, state food bank associations, working groups, webinars, and informal meetings to share and compare practices. Food banks were also encouraged to adopt similar programs based on funding from the USDA, Feeding America, and other sources.

Donors' influences were ubiquitous throughout the food bank network, as food banks procured sufficient resources to fulfill their missions. Mission statements are a method that food banks use to signal values and the legitimacy of their work to donors. Food banks also

implemented programs based on donor interests; administrators reported establishing programs when donors offered funding for specific program types. For example, the National Feeding America Organization had provided pilot funding to its food banks for backpack programs, which steered the direction of food bank programs. Administrators continued to operate such programs for more than a decade after Feeding America had stopped providing funding, demonstrating the lasting impact targeted funding has long after funding ends.

Food bank administrators rarely mentioned discontinued programs, except changes to programs due to Covid-19 public health orders. As they shifted to focus on ending hunger and poverty, they added new programs, which were often individualistic and aligned with the dominant ideology of personal responsibility. During the past decade, food banks increasingly used structural approaches to address poverty. As they made the shift, they added new programs that targeted structural root causes in addition to their existing programs that aligned with the personal responsibility and traditional charity models. The administrators often framed the root causes of hunger as simultaneously individual and structural. Todd, executive director of an independent food bank, said:

> Obviously, communities don't need food banks unless you have low-income families or community members, right? Simple as that. If you're dealing with low income, now that breaks into two different categories…. One is things like job training, right? And two are social issues. One of which...comes down to things like racism. (Todd, 2022)

This statement demonstrates how administrators were attributing hunger and poverty to both individual and structural root causes. In interviews, administrators also defined structural root causes of poverty while pairing them with individualistic programming. These contradictions demonstrate that food banks are influenced by multiple ideologies as they try to fulfill their missions with limited resources.

Historical practices clearly influence food banks heavily, but the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that existing food bank structures are not inevitable. The pandemic demonstrated that food banks took up programs rapidly that they had previously claimed were unfeasible, such as exponentially increasing volumes and creating home delivery programs. However, the pandemic also showed how food banks continued to operate models of in-kind food distribution, even when their income shifted from in-kind food to cash. Covid-19 drove food banks nationwide to change their programs quickly. The changes impacted both in-kind food assistance and other programs related to their missions. The pandemic led to both temporary and long-term program changes as food banks adjusted operations to accord with public health guidance and as they received new sources of resources. Many food banks that had recently adopted client-choice models, which allow people to choose their food, reverted to prepacked boxes of food distributed in large drive-through programs. Food banks also shifted to direct distribution of food, rather than relying on partner agencies, because many partners shut down during the crisis. Food banks also increasingly offered delivery, which was desirable but had been considered infeasible before the pandemic. Many food banks used new cash resources to continue purchasing food in-kind, but some switched to offering cash-based resources and devoting more resources to addressing root causes. These changes suggest that food banks are more mutable than previously thought. This further suggests the potential for food banks to shift rapidly away from the organizational legacy of gleaning food waste to meeting the needs of people who are experiencing hunger, and ultimately working to end hunger.

Conclusion

The pandemic drove widespread changes throughout U.S. food banks, affecting missions and programs. The changes furthered some food banks' shifts from being logistics organizations

that focused on redistributing food waste to becoming anti-poverty organizations that seek to eradicate societal inequities that cause hunger. Shifts were piecemeal both in organizations and throughout the industry as practices shifted, and only some organizations sought to step into these new roles. While speaking to the administrators, I observed organizations with patchwork approaches that reflected trends in food banking as well as food banking's organizational legacy. Sometimes, administrators did acknowledge the systemic nature of poverty as a social issue, but they still implemented solutions that were individually focused, such as nutrition education and job training. When food banks frame hunger as part of larger systemic issues of racism and poverty but still focus on individual solutions to address these inequities, they perpetuate the idea that inequalities reflect individual shortcomings.

Food banks and their administrators did not fit wholly into these models, but the models identify how food banks have been influenced by historical processes and cultural ideologies regarding how to address poverty best. By connecting food banks' missions and programs to the models, I expose how these ideologies appear in practice, even as food banks use mixed approaches. The programs are not only inconsistent with mission statements and other programming; many contradict current research on the root causes of poverty and hunger. Missions and programs that aligned with the personal responsibility model claimed to address the root causes of hunger and poverty in an individualized manner. Individualistic ascriptions of poverty's root causes do not align with sociological evidence on the causes of hunger, which indicates poverty is a result of systemic inequities rather than individual failures (Allard, 2009; Brady, 2009; Brady et al., 2017; Desmond & Western, 2018; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Poppendieck, 1998). This dissonance is particularly concerning because food banks are respected

community institutions that heavily influence both policy and public opinion on hunger and poverty.

Given increasing reliance on food banks as providers of both public and private social services, they are a crucial aspect of the contemporary U.S. social safety net. Food banks demonstrate the potential of creating systemic change, which could lead to a more just society. However, their efforts are impacted by organizational roots that do not emphasize equity or the needs of people who are experiencing hunger. In this chapter, I traced how food banks associate with three historically influenced models of food banking by examining their missions and programs. In the next chapter, I turn to food bank metrics to examine how food banks evaluate their own work and legitimize it externally to funders, donors, and the public. I trace how these metrics continue to be influenced by the three models of food banking but are also highly reflective of requirements from Feeding America, donors, and the government. Such metrics further reflect inconsistencies with food banks' goals and the measures they use for accountability.

Chapter 4. Measuring Successful Food Banking

Abbreviations

BIPOC:	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CHOP:	Choosing Healthy Options Program (nutritional metric)
DEI:	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
F2E:	Foods to Encourage (nutritional metric)
HHRI:	Healthy Hunger Relief Index
LFPA:	Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program
MPIN:	Meals per Person in Need
SNAP:	The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
SWAP:	Supporting Wellness at Pantries
TEFAP:	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
USDA:	United States Department of Agriculture

As food banks increasingly prioritize their aim to end hunger, they require metrics to measure their progress and determine whether their programming is effectively addressing this issue. Organizational metrics allow an organization to track its work and hold itself accountable for efficiency and achieving its goals. Metrics are also a way nonprofits legitimate themselves, particularly to donors (Brest, 2020). Individual donors do not typically track the effectiveness of their donations, but government, corporations, and foundations increasingly treat their contributions as "investments" that should generate positive social impacts as "returns" (Brest, 2020). Metrics provide a focal point for food banks, reflected in the common organizational saying, "You get what you measure" (Fisher, 2017a, p. 67). In asking food bank administrators

how they measured their organizational success, I sought to elucidate how these administrators conceptualize and frame what makes a successful food bank.

In this chapter, I assess what food banks measure and how these measures align with their missions and efforts to end hunger. I begin by historically contextualizing how organizational metrics have been used in the nonprofit sector since the end of WWII. Then, I develop how organizational theory has addressed organizational missions and metrics as legitimacy-conferring principles and structures. Finally, I analyze my interviews with food bank executives and discuss the relationship between the metrics they use to measure their successes, their intended outcomes and common influences on food bank metrics. The tensions administrators described between how they measure success and what they personally believed constitutes success highlight contestation within the field and within organizations of what a food bank should be.

Organizational Metrics and Food Banking

The importance of metrics to nonprofits began after WWII, a time of increased government investment, and their use accelerated in response to the War on Poverty and developments in evaluation research during the 1960s and 1970s (Brest, 2020). Attention given to nonprofit metrics, particularly outcome-based ones, surged at the turn of the 21st century when philanthropic activity from people in venture capital and technology industries increased (Brest, 2020; Horvath & Powell, 2020). Outcome metrics in the social services are also characteristic of the neoliberal era's increased surveillance (De Souza, 2019).

An outcome-based framework has four parts—"clearly defined goals (or outcomes), evidence-informed strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating success" (Brest, 2020, p. 392). Organizational metrics evaluate success, and they can be quantitative or qualitative. However, in

our data-driven and market-centered society, quantitative metrics hold the most power and influence among nonprofits (Brest, 2020). Outcome metrics are used to rationalize nonprofit work and increase investments in more effective policies and programs (Brest, 2020). Outcome-based metrics, which are supposed to focus on achieving goals (e.g., lowering food insecurity and increasing consumption of nutritious food), are commonly contrasted with output-based metrics, which highlight an organization's products (e.g., pounds of food distributed and number of people served) (Fisher, 2017a; Martin, 2021).

However, heavy emphasis on outcome-based metrics has also been criticized for leading to metric exploitation, being difficult and expensive to measure, and ignoring the voices of those who are supposed to benefit from nonprofit programs (Brest, 2020). Funders have increasingly emphasized metrics, so nonprofits have been incentivized to game the system with metrics and report misleading information (Brest, 2020; Mosley, 2020). Outcome-based metrics are more difficult to implement in nonprofits that address issues of culture, art, entertainment, and public policy work (Brest, 2020). Social service nonprofits, such as food banks, are a prime example of the kind of nonprofit that experts currently believe should use outcome-based metrics (Brest, 2020). However, as food banks have pivoted toward policy work, their outcomes have become more difficult to measure (Brest, 2020). Outcome-based metrics can also be costly, directing resources away from the work they measure (Brest, 2020). Furthermore, discussions on outcomes-based metrics have largely occurred between funders and nonprofit personnel, leaving out the voices and values of the people whom nonprofits serve (Brest, 2020).

During the same period that nonprofit funding became data-driven and outcome-focused, food banks began to pay greater attention to systemic causes and ending hunger (see Chapter 3). In interviews, I asked food bank administrators how their organizations measured success while

operating in this new context. The administrators often reported they were developing new metrics. Some shared that they were updating metrics as they reconceptualized the focus of their organization, particularly given the upsurge in national attention on equity. For some Feeding America food banks, administrators anticipated making changes as the National Feeding America Organization was in the process of updating its contracts and associated metrics for member food banks. For others, this was a frequent process that occurred every two to three years, when their organizations developed business plans. I inquired into what these new metrics might be, but the administrators often told me that they either did not know or could not yet share such proprietary information. I therefore focused on what the administrators shared with me, which, predominantly, were metrics in use at the time. These metrics reflected the food banks' practices during the study period rather than their aspirations for the future.

First, the food banks in my sample almost universally measured success in terms of pounds of food distributed, despite this approach not aligning with many of these organizations' missions. Moreover, as a metric, it was also heavily criticized by the administrators I interviewed. This metric reflects the legacy of food banks being redistributors of gleaned food, and it focuses on food provisioning, as seen in the traditional charity model (see Chapter 2). Since most food banks in my sample reported that their mission was to end hunger and poverty (see Chapter 3), this metric also does not align with their stated missions. Other researchers have also criticized the disconnect between measuring pounds of food distributed and achieving food banks' goals of ending hunger or increasing nutrition (Bouek, 2018a; De Souza, 2019; Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes & Pine, 2023; Martin, 2021; Poppendieck, 1998). I thus draw from organizational theory of isomorphism to explore influences on food banks that contribute to the proliferation of metrics that do not align with organizational goals. I outline the theory of isomorphism before

introducing how food banks measure success, how those metrics align with their missions, and what forces influence such metrics.

Theory: Pressures to Conform

To assess how it is that food banks so consistently adopt metrics that misalign with their stated missions, I use the theory of "organizational isomorphism" to argue that nonprofit food banks have become more similar to one another, as market-driven logics have permeated their sector (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) developed the theory to suggest that three overlapping processes contribute to sameness among organizations—coercive, mimetic, and normative forms of isomorphism. These institutional processes represent mechanisms by which organizational decision-making is shaped by external organizational forces. I argue that isomorphic processes, particularly the coercive form, have pushed food banks' metrics to be very similar, even when such metrics do not align well with the missions of individual nonprofit food banks.

Coercive isomorphism reflects how organizations adopt similar practices based on their dependence on outside resources and through informal efforts to establish legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Food banks are subject to fierce competition for scarce resources, such as funding and food donations, which incentivizes their adoption of missions, programs, and metrics that appeal to corporate donors and governmental requirements (Bouek, 2018a; Fisher, 2017a; Riches, 2018). This is de facto coercive isomorphism, since adoption reflects outside bodies "forcing" food banks to adopt specific items to be eligible for resources. Bouek (2018a) argues that the National Feeding America Organization exerts considerable coercive pressures on their member food banks to support their own funders' requirements. Fisher (2017a) details that high involvement of food industry corporate executives on food banks' boards of directors

influences food banks' political advocacy. Lohnes (2021) demonstrates that federal policies on tax subsidies for food donations regulate how donated food can be used.

Mimetic isomorphism describes similarities that arise through modeling activities between organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Such processes occur when organizations are uncertain about how to proceed and thus model their behaviors on other organizations' practices, which can be picked up through intentional benchmarking or through less formal practices such as employee turnover (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Food bank administrators reported that they repeatedly compare themselves to other food banks using "peer benchmarking practices." Extant research also reports high staff and volunteer turnover in food banking (Haynes Stein, 2023), and more than one-third of food bank administrators in my interview sample (35%) are no longer employed at the same organization as they were during the interviews.[22]

Normative isomorphism derives from professionalization through both formal education and professional networks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Most people in my interview sample were highly educated, with 92% having at least a college degree and 51% having postgraduate or professional degrees. Several conferences were also referenced in interviews that facilitated professional networks, including the National Feeding America Organization's member conference, the National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, and the California Association of Food Banks Conference. I was unable to attend Feeding America's conference since it was closed to the public, but I attended the National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference online and the California

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[22] Assessment of turnover within the sample is based on searches of organizational websites I conducted in February 2024.

Association of Food Banks Conference in person. These conferences included presentations on best practices and networking events during which food bank administrators created professional ties. These are prime examples of the normative isomorphic pressures in the food banking sector

The three forms of isomorphic pressure lead organizations to look and act similarly, which explains how organizations with more power and resources influence organizations that depend on them (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Food Banks' Metrics

Measuring success is crucial to decision-making because it helps organizations know when to stay the course and when to change. Evaluation using outcome-based measures helps food banks determine how effectively they are fulfilling their missions, no matter which models align with their missions. Most food banks use multiple metrics, but I found that the most common were pounds of food (mentioned by 95% of the administrators) and number of people served (mentioned by 58%), which are output-based metrics. Emphasis on outputs led many food banks to rely on metrics that do not align with their mission statements. Pounds of food distributed, for example, is a metric that corresponds with the traditional charity model as it reflects material goods provided to people it poverty and reflects efforts to alleviate experiences of hunger rather than end hunger. While mismatches between measured outputs and intended outcomes are a common problem among nonprofit organizations, attention to aligning nonprofit missions with outcome-based measures is on the rise (Brest, 2020; Bromley & Powell, 2012). While in many cases existing food bank metrics fell short, many administrators I spoke with described efforts within their own organizations and Feeding America to adopt new measures, suggesting that a shift is occurring. I explore the metrics that food banks currently use and discuss the types of success they measure.

Pounds of Food

The volume of food distributed lies at the core of how most food banks are measuring their efforts and success, being mentioned in 95% of my interviews with food bank administrators. This metric aligns with food banks' historical roots as redistributors of gleaned food. Pounds of food is relatively easy to track as well, especially since the food banks in my sample had invested in industrial scales and software to track the metric. It also aligns with viewing food banks as supply chain management organizations, emphasizing tracking how much food they are redistributing rather than the impact of their work. Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, stated, "When you get down to it… [food banks are] logistics with a mission" (Scott, 2021). Scott's food bank's mission echoed themes in the traditional charity and personal responsibility models. Fisher (2017a) argues that this metric is popular because it allows food banks to demonstrate growth, a quality largely unquestioned and valued in capitalism.

When I asked Charles, an independent food bank CEO, how his food bank measures food, he emphasized that pounds is a common metric across food banks:

> Charles: The one thing you'll see in food banking is its pounds. Pounds, pounds, pounds. Everybody weighs everything, and that's how they measure a lot of what they're doing.
> Alana: Yeah, so why do you measure success in this way?
> Charles: Well, because it knows how much food we're getting out…and then how many people are we reaching. I mean, that is, it's pretty simplistic. But you know if you're getting out 6 million pounds of food, you know that you're giving a lot more food out, and you're reaching a lot more people…. Not all food banks do this, but we actually count our service population unduplicated. And our agencies are, that's one of their mandates, that our partner agencies have to report their numbers. (Charles, 2021)

Beyond emphasizing pounds as a food banking metric, Charles also justified what his food bank believed it measured. He suggested that distributing a greater volume of food meant that they were serving more people, which other administrators who did not count unduplicated clients also claimed. Charles reported that his food bank also counted the number of people

served, but he emphasized pounds of food as an essential metric for the food bank, whose mission had components of all three models. He described that his food bank also required partner agencies to collect these same metrics, furthering the practice. Charles emphasized how easy this metric was made by having “scales all over the food bank,” showing how it had invested in infrastructure to maintain the metric (Charles, 2021).

Although food weight is easy to measure, consumers typically do not think of food based on weight, which led many food banks to convert weight-based metrics to the number of meals distributed. Number of meals distributed was thus a popular metric among the food banks in my sample. Generally, in food banking the number of meals is just a conversion of total pounds of food distributed, where one meal is measured as 1.2 pounds of food (Feeding America, 2023). This does not comport with what most people would consider a meal. According to the metric, a 20-ounce soda is just over one meal, and the average watermelon would be about 18 meals. Food banks use this adjustment to make the metric of pounds more relatable, but characterizing pounds of food as a meal implies that food banks supply balanced food servings that vary and contain all of the ingredients necessary to make a recipe. However, prior research on food banks and food pantries has found that food bank distributions vary greatly and often include many of the same item, such 12 loaves of bread per person or bags of canned corn (Dickinson, 2019; Haynes Stein, 2023). While food banks may count these loaves of bread or a bag of canned corn as 10 meals provided, these do not correspond with a complete meal.

Collecting and transforming data on pounds of food is an essential reporting requirement for Feeding America food banks. The National Feeding America Organization measures the Feeding America Network’s coverage by assessing meals per person in need (MPIN), a metric that food bank administrators discussed during 32% of interviews. MPIN represents the county-

level computation of pounds of food distributed (and SNAP applications assisted on) related to rates of food insecurity that are determined by Feeding America's own Map the Meal Gap research (Lohnes, 2019). Creating a ratio of pounds distributed in relation to food insecurity across counties measures a component of equitable distribution beyond simply counting pounds (Hasnain et al., 2021). It attunes food bank administrators to spatial inequities, though they address them at the county level by providing more pounds of food, which corresponds with their metrics.

In what follows, I share discussions with food bank administrators regarding what it means to rely on pounds distributed as a component of this measure. Focusing on pounds (or meals) distributed is also prevalent in food banks outside of the Feeding America Network. For instances, Charles described how his independent food bank used Feeding America's older version of the metric without knowing the relevance of the goal, stating, "There's a term that you may hear in some of your other interviews, pounds per person in poverty, and apparently, the gold standard is 86 pounds. Don't ask me how they come up with that" (Charles, 2021). Pound-based metrics dominated the industry before most of the administrators whom I interviewed had joined their organizations. Again, the pound-based metric has many shortfalls, as many administrators pointed out to me. Even those who used output-based measures critiqued the pounds of food metric for not capturing quality, particularly nutrition. Cody, director at a Feeding America PDO food bank whose mission included components from all three models, explained:

> If you're only looking at the metric of pounds, you could just distribute a ton of soda and just make everybody worse off, and so it's not really a good key performance indicator when it comes to tracking your metrics and how successful you're being. (Cody, 2021)

His original critique was about nutrition, but he went on to discuss a more nuanced perspective, contrasting food supply with demand for food bank resources (Cody, 2021). He maintained a focus on nutrition and health, but described that his food bank is looking for metrics that demonstrate impact on people's lives, rather than how much food was distributed or simply how many people served. Another shortfall of MPIN and its corresponding meal gap is that the metric does not correspond to meeting the needs in an area. The metric frames itself as responsive to need, though it is not, as Scott explained:

> In no way, shape, or form are we getting enough food in some ways to satisfy 100% of the need. Even when I talked about the fact that we might have closed our meal gap, that's a standard set by Feeding America. That doesn't necessarily say, look, that's like I'm supplying 100% of the meals of a person for a year, or something like that, right? (Scott, 2021)

Since food banks like Scott's are operating in a scarcity framework, pounds of food reflects the supply of food distributed rather than rates of hunger or food insecurity. Meeting Feeding America's meal gap does not mean that an organization is meeting the need for food in its area. Measuring pounds distributed in no way measures hunger, food insecurity, or a food bank's success with reducing them.

Counting People Served. Many of the administrators (58%) also counted the number of people they served, making this the next most common metric discussed by food bank administrators in my interviews. The number of people served metric reflects the service side of the organization more than the supply-based metric of pounds. The number of people a program serves is a common metric that federal programs like SNAP and school meals use, but these federal programs have budgets that respond to changes in need. Food banks are not responsive to need because they manage and distribute finite resources they receive from donations and government commodity programs. The number of people served by food banks largely reflects

the supply of food available to them, rather than changes in the demand for their services. Furthermore, extant research on these responsive public social safety net programs suggests that fluctuations in use relate heavily to administrative burdens of accessing programs, rather than reflecting levels of need for them (Dickinson, 2019; Hays, 2003; Ray et al., 2023). Thus, the number of people a program serves is more reflective of the supply of resources and barriers to accessing these programs than it is the level of need for the program.

In a quote from the previous section, Charles highlighted that his food bank tracks who is present and how many new people arrive to partake of the food they distribute. He compares this method to the industry standard of counting the number of people who come to a food distribution event. The problem with this method, Charles suggested, is that some people might be counted multiple times because they attend distributions regularly or visit multiple pantries to fulfill their needs. This points to important differences regarding how this metric can be interpreted and what it can indicate. When counts potentially include the same people multiple times, they reflect how much assistance is accessed, not how many people are assisted and how often. Unduplicated counts provide greater precision, but they require more program administration and the potentially invasive tracking of people. For example, Haynes Stein (2023) reports that people claimed that when food assistance programs asked for identification, it made them feel like they had lost their privacy. During interviews, food bank administrators reported that asking for identification created a barrier to food assistance programs, particularly among immigrants who were fearful of surveillance. Indeed, one-third of the administrators (n=20) I interviewed referred to heightened fears of accessing food assistance among immigrant populations related to federal public charge policies or immigration status.

Basic counts of people, therefore, served as an easy metric for food banks to calculate. Counting the number of people served by programs corresponds with traditional charity missions of food provisioning and hunger alleviation. However, the metric does not reflect ending hunger and poverty.

Serving More Food and People as Success or Failure. Another issue with count-based metrics is that they do not distinguish success and failure. Depending on their circumstances, food banks could point to trends in either direction of these common metrics as either a sign of success or failure. The administrators claimed that increasing pounds or the number of clients served indicated success with coming closer to meeting need. However, they sometimes referred to decreased food distribution and fewer clients served as a sign that fewer people were in need.

Cheryl, a food bank executive director, pointed out this contradiction when she explained how her food bank measures success, stating:

> In the counties we're in, we are keeping a list of how many families we fed. And that to us, if it increases, is a success. And the irony is if there's less people there, we also think that's a success too, because maybe they don't need us. So it's all about how much we're distributing out of our warehouse…. Because that's just really all we have to go on. Cheryl, 2021)

Cheryl reported that her food bank relies on these metrics but that trends in either direction could still be considered a success. When I asked her to elaborate, she said:

> Alana: So, you said if more people come, that's success, and if less people come, that's success. So, how do you kind of manage that?
> Cheryl: Well, yeah, we are breaking it down; like I said, we're getting information on how many are in the family, how long have you needed [our food bank]? Is this your first time at a food bank? Those kinds of questions, we're getting more detailed. It's not sufficient enough yet, I can tell you that, but it's a start on knowing more food went to [a specific county] last year, and more families if they needed us, but then if they reported we didn't need you anymore, that would be the ultimate success. Right? (Cheryl, 2021)

Cheryl spoke of how they are working to collect more information about clients. However, when I asked whether her food bank had a way of determining whether clients no

longer needed food bank resources, she said that was not a measure they had yet achieved (Cheryl, 2021). It did not appear that even their planned methods would achieve this goal because people who were no longer attending food distributions would be missing from their data.

When discussing changing needs during the pandemic, Scott described the equation of outputs and demand as a common fallacy in food banking, stating,

> So a mistake when you're looking at a food bank is to think of like, "Oh! We're doing more; demand is higher." And you'll see probably some of the other interviews people saying stuff like that. It's bullshit! We don't meet need. We never did. So, it's like if you're not meeting the need, and need goes up or down and you're not there, it's not relevant, right? (Scott, 2021)

Scott pointed out that food banks are not responsive to need, only to their supply of food. Thus, distributing more food cannot be characterized as representing increased need. Scott viewed these output-based metrics as unable to measure his organization's success with achieving its mission, which included food provision and several ways of addressing root causes that aligned with the personal responsibility model.

Some administrators I interviewed referenced a common food banking refrain of "putting their organizations out of business," drawing on the notion that food banks represent a temporary solution to a temporary problem of hunger (Poppendieck, 1998). Initially food banks were viewed as temporary, but they eventually became institutionalized sources of social services in an era of accelerating inequality. During my conversation with Justin, a CEO of a Feeding America food bank, he shared his thoughts on how the success of food banks is often measured by the amount of food they distribute. He explained how this metric fails to capture the bigger picture and how food banks have become institutionalized, deviating from their original purpose as a temporary solution to hunger. He joked:

> My goal when I took the job in [the 1980s] was to go out of business, and I failed miserably at my life's goal. Since we were giving out 3 million pounds that year, and now this past year, we gave out 85 million pounds of food. (Justin, 2021)

Justin suggests that the original goal during the 1980s was "ending hunger" which is part of his organization's mission statement. He argued that distributing more pounds of food is the opposite of ending hunger, and of making the need for the food bank obsolete.

Brandon, vice president at an independent food bank whose mission was provision of food in-kind, pointed out the moral values that undergird their success, if success is framed as distributing more food, especially when levels of need are controlled for. He said,

> I look at numbers daily to see how many people we're serving, but that doesn't make me feel successful; that just makes me sad, especially when I say that those numbers are growing, especially at the rates that they're growing. (Brandon, 2022)

He reiterated that he would like to put himself out of a job, but he does not view that as feasible. To him, seeing increasing output reflects a personal disappointment in the state of hunger in society, rather than a reflection of his organization being more or less successful. Interestingly, he still viewed growth in outputs as a disappointment despite it aligning directly with his food bank's mission.

Count-based metrics like pounds of food distributed are not a strong indicator of success when a trend in any direction can be attributed to one's success. The cases of Cheryl, Justin, and Brandon showed how the same trend of more pounds of food distributed could be interpreted by food banks to mean either success or failure. The ways that the food bank administrators conceived of distributing more food relied on the false assumption that they were meeting and responding to the needs of the communities they served, which led them to interpret metrics in these ways. They are incentivized to demonstrate success, no matter what, as they compete for

scarce funding. In trying to use count-based metrics to measure outcomes, food banks spoke beyond what such data could indicate.

Double Counting Public Assistance. When the National Feeding America Organization reports the number of meals it provides, the metric does not refer solely to purely private food assistance; it also accounts for the public food assistance that the Feeding America Network helps people access. Feeding America and food banks play a role in administering public programs such as TEFAP and enrolling people in SNAP (discussed in Chapter 3), and it is thus logical for these organizations to account for their role in this in some way. However, conflating such metrics suggests that more food assistance is being provided by the combined efforts of public and private social safety nets than is actually being distributed. This accounting suggests food banks are doing more than they really are and, therefore, contributes to narratives tied to Hooverism and the personal responsibility model that suggest that nonprofits can replace government social services.

Both food banks and the federal government count the work they do in administrating programs. In annual reports, the National Feeding America Organization claims that the Feeding America Network provided 5.2 billion meals to people in the United States during 2022 (Feeding America, 2023). Of them, 2.87 billion came from retail, farm, and manufacturing donations, 1.2 billion from federal commodity programs, 0.9 billion from purchased food, and 0.25 billion through SNAP referral and application assistance (Feeding America, 2023). From a combination of federal commodities and SNAP, more than one-quarter of meals that the National Feeding America Organization claims to have provided came from federal food assistance programs. Planning documents from individual food banks also show that Feeding America food banks are

also counting SNAP application assistance as part of the number of meals they distributed (Harvesters Community Food Network, 2022; Manna Food Bank, 2017).

The National Feeding America Organization calculates such benefits based on the full expected value of SNAP benefits. It uses national and state-based estimates for application acceptance, benefit amounts, and length of benefits to compute the total value of benefits (Feeding America, personal communication, March 5, 2024). It then divides the total value of assistance that an applicant is expected to receive by the estimated costs of a meal ($3.59) in 2021 (Feeding America, personal communication, March 5, 2024). Using national-level data, a food bank that assists with one SNAP application is thus estimated to provide $1,864 or 519 meals (Feeding America, personal communication, March 5, 2024).

During the 2022 fiscal year (i.e., October 2021–September 2022), the federal government administered $114.1 billion in assistance to households through SNAP (Toossi & Jones, 2023). About 41.2 million people received SNAP assistance each month during that year (Toossi & Jones, 2023). The federal government counts all SNAP assistance it provides, regardless of who assists in enrolling beneficiaries. It similarly claims to have provided approximately $900 million in TEFAP funding during fiscal year 2022 (Castro, 2022). Food banks predominately administer TEFAP, but the federal government still counts it as part of its own food assistance since it provides the food. When both public and private food assistance systems count the food they distribute through these programs, assistance is double counted, suggesting that more food assistance is being provided than is true.

Calculating metrics this way suggests that the private food assistance system provides food that the federal government finances, fostering the perception that the private food assistance system could easily replace the government in administering the social safety net

when, instead, the private social safety net relies heavily on public programs to do its work. The National Feeding America Organization’s annual report includes a breakdown of these numbers, reporting how much food derives from the federal government, but the language on its website that explains their work does not include references to federal programs’ roles in supplying food. The website describes how food bank programs provide food, stating, “In 2023, the Feeding America network distributed 5.3 billion meals through programs like mobile pantries and Kids Cafes to help people in communities like yours get the food they need to thrive” (Feeding America, 2024). When framing the food it distributes, the organization also emphasizes a program that serves the “deserving poor” (a theme described in Chapter 3.)

Obscuring the federal government's role in providing food supports the personal responsibility model and the defunding of public social safety net programs. It suggests that food banks can achieve more independently, when in fact food banks rely heavily on public social safety net programs to meet their goals. This contrasts with the National Feeding America Organization’s mission “to advance change in America by ensuring equitable access to nutritious food for all in partnership with food banks, policymakers, supporters, and the communities we serve” (Feeding America, 2021a, p. 1). The essential partnership of policymakers is obscured when SNAP assistance is counted as food distributed by food banks, and it suggests that more food assistance is being distributed than is the case.

Measuring Health and Nutrition

Food bank metrics have changed to emphasize nutrition and health. In Chapter 3, I discussed how food banks are developing new programs that distribute more nutritious food, teach nutrition education, and develop food prescriptions. Food banks and related organizations

are also continually developing new systems to measure the nutrition and health programs that food banks operate.

Nearly half of the administrators (45%) had a metric to measure the nutrition of the food they distributed. The simplest was pounds of produce, sometimes also differentiating other food items. William, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described how the prevalence of nutrition-based metrics in the Feeding America Network grew especially during the last decade, stating:

> The last ten years, in particular, a drastic increase in the amount of fresh food that we distribute, so looking more at nourishing and nutritious food in our systems. Along with almost every other Feeding America food bank, we actually measure, now, what we call "foods to encourage"—the more nourishing foods. We're working on staying away from the word *healthy* cause that's become kind of a loaded term, and I prefer nutritious or nourishing. (William, 2021)

William highlighted that most Feeding America food banks have shifted their volume metrics to incorporate some measure of nutritious or healthy food, consistent with research from MAZON, which found that more than half of food banks were using metrics to track the nutritional quality of food they distributed during 2017 (Feldman & Schwartz, 2018). Unlike most of the administrators with whom I spoke, William reflected on and recognized problems with the connotations and social meaning of "healthy" food. This aligns with food studies research on how the meaning of healthy and nutritious food is constructed socially and reflected in dominant cultural values (Biltekoff, 2013; Carney, 2015b; Guthman, 2011). However, William ultimately reinforced the same ideas related to healthy food, just using the words "nutritious" and "nourishing" (William, 2021).

Nick, manager of a Feeding America PDO food bank, described his organization's emphasis on measuring healthy food in terms of pounds to demonstrate organizational success, stating:

> We measure success by the amount of healthy food that we're picking up, as well as the amount of food that we are repacking, and meeting our budget…. One of the things that we do is that we weigh food. That's how we measure how much healthy food we get out. (Nick, 2021)

Nick went on to describe that his food bank classified the food it obtained into either "healthy" or "unhealthy" food, in line with his food bank's mission of providing healthy food to people while reducing food waste (Nick, 2021). His food bank considered healthy foods to be "fresh or frozen [sugar-less] grain [products], dairy, meat, fruits, and vegetables" (Nick, 2021). It classified other food categories as "unhealthy," including bakery items (any grain product with sugar such as donuts or muffins), prepared foods, non-perishable foods, and beverages (Nick, 2021). Nick reported that 82% of food fit in the "healthy" category, saying his food bank would not accept any soda and that it limited the sweets they get (Nick, 2021). When asked why the food bank measures success this way, Nick replied:

> I don't have a simple answer for that. It's something that we can effectively, efficiently measure. Even what is healthy food? We don't know. There's no consensus around that, but what we do know is that there's unhealthy food…. And we have limited resources…. It's happened to align with our mission to pick up healthy food, but we know that what pantry recipients want is healthier food, the fresh produce, high-quality food. So that's…the reason we measure it is because we can measure it with scales, just in our operations. And I guess the reason is people want healthy food. (Nick, 2021)

Nick highlighted that these measurements arose from convenience, accorded with the organization's mission, and aligned with clients' desires for higher-quality food. This metric mostly aligns with Nick's organization's mission of providing food in-kind, but Nick's decision-making demonstrates garbage can problem-solving. In line with the garbage-can model, his organization identified a solution and found a justification for a problem to match it (Cohen et al., 1972).

Other food banks implemented detailed rationalized systems to measure nutritious food. To legitimize the nutritional quality of their food, they appear to increasingly rely on nutritional

and health-focused rating systems. In 2004, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and a team of nutritionists developed CHOP (Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, 2015). The National Feeding America Organization developed F2E and then espoused it as a guideline for their food banks in 2015 (Feeding America, 2015). During 2017, a survey by MAZON found that 54% of food banks were implementing inventory tracking system metrics to track the nutrition of food (Feldman & Schwartz, 2018). The survey found of those using an inventory tracking system, 57% used Foods to Encourage (F2E), 20% used Choosing Healthy Options Program (CHOP), and the remainder used custom systems (Feldman & Schwartz, 2018). Another system, Supporting Wellness at Pantries (SWAP), was developed by Martin et al. (2019) at the same time that other food banks continued to develop metrics of their own. More than seven indicators have been developed specifically for private food assistance organizations, and other guidelines are sometimes used from other types of nonprofits and government guidelines (M. Schwartz et al., 2020).

Some rating systems are similar in structure to Nick's food bank's system, though others are more technical. Both F2E and SWAP rank foods by taking broad categories of food and breaking them into two to three ranked categories to determine which foods are healthy (Martin et al., 2019). CHOP ranks food based on ratios of nine nutrients, classifying some as "positive" (e.g., vitamins) and others "negative" (e.g., sugar and sodium) (Martin et al., 2019; M. Schwartz et al., 2020). The Healthy Hunger Relief Index (HHRI) is a newer, more comprehensive measure that looks beyond just food composition to other aspects of the organization, including mission statements and staff policies for health and wellness (Costanzo, 2022d). These systems capitalize on food banks' and donors' interest in measuring healthy food, offering new ways for food banks to legitimize operations as promoting health and nutrition.

Some administrators framed nutrition-focused metrics as measures of their success at addressing root causes of hunger. This came from a critique of existing emphases on in-kind food distributions and pounds of food as ineffective means to end hunger, but it resulted in new metrics that still did not reflect the mission of ending hunger. Charles, CEO of an independent food bank with a mission that aligns with all three food bank models, articulated that his experience at other non-profits quickly led him to realize that the food bank model would not resolve hunger. However, he moved to a highly individualized solution to hunger that included nutrition education and improving the food bank's nutrition metrics. He reported:

> I came to the hunger community, didn't know anything about it, and everybody said, "Our goal is to end hunger." And their way of ending hunger was being more efficient and feeding people. And that's not ending hunger…. So, our agency really is evolving from being just a hunger organization to really being an anti-poverty organization…. Our biggest way of trying to end hunger is supporting education because we feel education is a major vehicle to break the cycle of poverty, and childhood education starts with childhood nutrition…. We grade all the food we distribute. We use a thing called CHOP…. It's not just enough to give people healthy food. You've got to change generations of behavior. So, we do cooking demonstrations, recipe cards…. We'll take them out [to] the store and tell you to shop on the outside of the store, where the healthy stuff is, and stay away from the middle of the store—the process[ed] stuff that you can afford. (Charles, 2021)

Charles pointed out that traditional food bank metrics such as pounds of food fail to measure his food bank's mission of ending hunger. Charles pointed out that the traditional charity model's reliance on donated food is what leads them to distribute unhealthy food in the first place. However, his alternative involved turning to other programs and metrics that individualize the cause of poverty and align with the personal responsibility model. Recognizing that traditional food banking cannot prevent and end hunger, Charles claimed to have transformed his organization from a hunger organization to an anti-poverty organization that uses the CHOP system as a metric of success. However, the discourse Charles used about changing

generations of behaviors and teaching people how to shop at a grocery store invoked a paternalistic, individualized view of poverty that is based on the problematic narrative of the culture of poverty. Rather than suggesting that his food bank reorient its metrics to focus on the number of people in hunger or poverty, he reoriented them around the CHOP system, assessing the percentage of healthy food distributed. Instead of addressing underlying conditions that lead people to be unable to afford healthy food, Charles turned to nutrition-focused metrics and programs that further narratives of individual behaviors that cause hunger. He even told people not to purchase the food they could afford.

The nutrition-based metrics discussed so far measure the success of classic programs of in-kind food distribution, grading the outputs of food banking. Food banks have become more involved in health initiatives such as food prescription programs (detailed in Chapter 3), and the food bank administrators discussed new accompanying measures of health outcomes. I interviewed Jerry, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a mission that incorporates both the traditional charity and systemic change models. He talked about his food bank's new food prescription program that supplies healthy food and offers nutrition education. He then described how he would like to measure success for the program, saying, "The holy grail is to have their biometrics tracked occasionally so we can, with data, verify what type of a difference this made in their health" (Jerry, 2021). Other administrators also reported measuring outcomes using individual medical data, including tracking clients' A1C levels, blood pressure, and weight loss. The administrators claimed that such metrics were valuable to the healthcare industry, but Anthony, a Feeding America food bank CEO, cautioned that health-related outcomes are "very complex and very expensive" to assess (Anthony, 2021). Medicalized metrics correspond with trends in medicalizing food assistance programs, and although such metrics measure outcomes

rather than outputs, they still characterize underlying problems as individual rather than social, a common issue of medicalization (Conrad, 2013).

Measuring Outcomes that Correspond to Hunger and Poverty

As food banks increasingly shifted toward ending hunger and as the systemic change model became more popular, some food banks sought new ways to measure this work while others abandoned outcome-based metrics. Raymond, a Feeding America food bank CEO, reported that this reflected a recent shift, saying, "If you were in a nonprofit organization five years ago, it was all about outputs; we produced X number of widgets, [but] today it's all about outcomes" (Raymond, 2021). The food bank administrators I interviewed knew that measuring outputs alone did not align with their missions, but many struggled to qualify and quantify what constitutes success. Only 40% of the administrators described measures of food insecurity, poverty, or level of need as part of their metrics. Many food banks struggled to measure outcomes, or did not attempt to do so. Scott, CEO of a Feeding America food bank whose mission incorporated the traditional charity and personal responsibility models, reported that his food bank abandoned measuring outcomes altogether, stating:

> Ultimately, we are able to best measure our outputs, and we have nice metrics for that. Outcomes, ultimately, we see these at a societal level, and the reality is we suck. Which is why we're still trying to do as much for this food distribution as we can, but ultimately, we see this as - What is the role that we play in changing the rules of the game? … That's why we see this as, ultimately, it's a bigger thing, so we have to simply engage on that side. (Scott, 2021)

Scott described difficulties with measuring success on the complicated issue of reducing hunger, which led his food bank to stop trying to measure such outcomes. He detailed their past efforts to measure and reduce child hunger, which his food bank viewed as feasible because food resources that were provided to families with hungry children are typically directed at the

children, whereas an adult might forgo food to pay rent. He claimed that only “about 1% of children actually experience hunger” (Scott, 2021).[23] However, he also said that his food bank encountered financial barriers when trying to measure a change in such a small proportion of children who were experiencing hunger because existing data do not include their localized area of service (Scott, 2021). His food bank turned to proxies, but those also failed as metrics, resulting in his food bank’s stance that it cannot feasibly measure these types of outcomes (Scott, 2021). His story reflected some of the difficulties with food banks implementing such measures without broader governmental support for localized research on food insecurity.

The administrators who came to food banking from other sectors described being shocked by the idiosyncrasies of food banking metrics. Frank, who had recently shifted from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector, described his experience working to develop a strong strategic plan when he took over as CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a mission that featured components of traditional charity and personal responsibility:

> [To] a lot of well-intentioned people, I said, “Well, so what's your plan?,” and they said, “Well, we raise X amount of money, and we spend all of it, and therefore, we're successful.” And I said, “And what about the need in the community?” They said, “Well, I mean, we can only raise so much money.” And I said, “Well, we're going to take a look at it from a different point of view. We're going to assess the need in the community and then figure out what plan has to happen in order to meet that” … It’s what we again do on the private side. So we wrote the strategic plan based on that, and it changes the dynamic hugely of what we have to do because we were doing everything we could beforehand, but now we're going to do everything we have to do, seeing it from a different perspective. (Frank, 2021)

[23] In 2021, 12.5% of U.S. households with children experienced food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022). Corroborating Scott’s argument, children are generally shielded from food insecurity since they experience it in 6.2% of U.S. households with children (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022). Scott might have been referring to child hunger as the USDA’s category of “very low food insecurity,” since only 0.7% of households with children had children experiencing that level of food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022).

Frank shared that his food bank had historically operated as a supply-driven organization with scarce resources, focusing on the amount of food and funds that donors supplied. Again, compared to government programs such as SNAP that respond to demand, food banks largely respond only to supply. Frank entered with a different perspective, encouraging his organization to develop a new strategic plan and metrics that centered on community needs rather than the amount of donations received.

Turning to outcomes that correspond to organizational missions, some administrators worked to measure their influence on food security, poverty, and community needs (discussed in 40% of interviews), or client satisfaction (a simple metric to collect, discussed by only 29% of the administrators). Shawn, CEO of an independent food bank, described that his food bank was revising its metrics. The food bank incorporated components of the systemic change model in its mission. Shawn emphasized that his food bank was shifting to focus on client satisfaction:

> Historically, [our success metrics were] about the number of pounds that we distributed. But I think that's a really unhelpful metric, actually. So, our most macro measurement is the number of people who are food insecure. And we have a goal. When we started with this goal, [x number of people in our region] were food insecure. Our goal is that [in 10 years], it'll be [half of that]. So that's our ultimate metric that we're working towards. The other thing that we're measuring, and we're working with [a university] to track…the number of people who rate their experiences at the food bank as satisfying. I think that's actually a much more important metric than the amount of things that you give away. (Shawn, 2021)

Shawn provided a clear example of how his food bank was becoming more attuned to reducing food insecurity through metrics focused on the community level. He also pointed out how his food bank can measure the success of its work and outcomes by surveying its clients. Shawn's food bank shifted from viewing success as distributing more food (i.e., output-based) to greater client satisfaction (i.e., outcome-based). Client satisfaction is a straightforward and accessible metric to track in comparison to a community's food insecurity, but it was a relatively

uncommon metric, absent from 70% of the interviews I conducted. Seven administrators who did not use client feedback, focused on partner agency feedback as a metric rather than clients, reflecting trends in nonprofits that commonly lack accountability to those that use their services, who are often marginalized groups (J. Alexander & Fernandez, 2021). Beyond measuring food insecurity and customer satisfaction, Shawn also described other metrics that redress systemic inequities to address their mission rooted in the systemic change model, such as how many resources were being directed to BIPOC-led partner agencies, how much decision-making incorporated equity considerations, and the representation of BIPOC people as leaders, staff members, and board directors.

Operationalizing Equity: Measuring Systemic Change

Prior to 2020, equity-based metrics were rare, according to the administrators. However, an increasing number of food banks had begun to focus more on equity, particularly following the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. Themes of DEI, food justice, and social justice were discussed in some form during most of the interviews (89%). The minority of food banks that had begun to focus on DEI before 2020 seemed to have more concrete strategies for incorporating DEI in their work and measuring their efforts to achieve these goals.

Food bank administrators most often discussed measuring equity by assessing spatial inequities, which 34% mentioned in interviews. The administrators described neighborhood-based spatial inequities experienced in BIPOC communities, but they more commonly measured spatial inequities at the county level, which aligned with Feeding America's MPIN metric. The administrators also related their way of addressing such inequities to output-based metrics, since they sought to measure how many pounds of food they distributed to communities, how many people they served in a location, and how many partner agencies they had in communities.

Some food banks also tried to focus on equitable processes rather than just the spatial equity of their outputs. Kim, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a mission of ending hunger, explained how her organization incorporated a "commitment to equity and racial justice" for more than five years (Kim, 2021). She described how this commitment was operationalized during decision-making, in which feedback from representatives of groups who disproportionately experience hunger was used to evaluate the food bank's partnerships and programs. She criticized the metric of pounds of food for its inability to capture equity, stating:

> So, for instance, the pounds metric is a scale metric, right? Shows how big we are. It does not, in any way, show how broad the reach was or whether Black and Brown people got their fair share… given that they are disproportionately impacted by hunger. So, we also look at the percentage of partners we have that are working in culturally specific or culturally relevant ways in a particular area. So we're continuing to poke and pry at those metrics. I love and hate metrics. On the one hand, you can't not have them, or you don't have an idea of how you're changing over time and what's important to you over time. And on the other hand, the focus on metrics is a particularly dominant culture approach, as opposed to focus on relationships, and it's the relationships that will get us to political power. (Kim, 2021)

Kim demonstrated how food bank metrics can be used to incorporate equity and reflect organizational values. However, she also criticizes emphasis on metrics as an approach stemming from the dominant culture, a sentiment echoed by Andrea, executive director of an independent food bank that also sought to incorporate equity throughout the organization (Andrea, 2022). Kim and Andrea's critiques of metrics as part of the dominant cultural approach are similar to those of critical researchers who relate increased focus on nonprofit metrics to increased marketization, elite control, and the depoliticization of nonprofits (J. Alexander & Fernandez, 2021).

Sharon, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a mission that incorporates all three models of food banking, described how her organization developed key performance indicators

(KPIs) to measure success using an equity lens. These metrics provided concrete examples of the ways in which her food bank was implementing measures to assess its success with achieving its mission, which incorporated discourse from the systemic change model.[24] She said:

> We are in the process right now of defining KPIs and metrics with that new strategic plan…. One of our KPIs is this intention to have 100% of teams and programs being informed by client input by the end of our fiscal 2024. We've also set targets about the proportion of our overall food stream that we want to meet our definition of nutritionally dense and culturally appropriate. We've set targets for the proportion of our vendor network that is BIPOC-owned. We have set targets for the number of BIPOC-led and serving agencies that we want to develop relationships with. We have set a target of developing a heat map of our service area by the end of this fiscal year and then developing annual operating plans that prioritize the distribution of resources to those areas that are most high-need. So, that's a sampling of some of the types of targets and measures we're putting in place. (Sharon, 2021)

Sharon outlined her food bank's strategy for incorporating client input throughout the organization, and working to promote equity across the organization, including food procurement, agency partnerships, and food distribution. When asked how her food bank measured success previously, she responded:

> Like many food banks, it was, "Are we doing more every year?" and often measured in pounds. And less focused on quality and more on quantity. And I think our programmatic efforts were more focused on utilizing quote "industry best practices and research" to inform program development. And the pivot that we've made now is to say, "That's nice," and we really need to hear from people who are impacted by hunger because we see them as the experts who know best what they need. (Sharon, 2021)

Sharon described the process of developing new metrics as shifting from "industry best practices and research" to those centered on the knowledge of people experiencing hunger. She described how her food bank consciously took a multi-pronged approach, including programming from the traditional charity model and working to end hunger. This represents a shift away from mimetic isomorphic pressures toward including, uplifting, and valuing

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[24] Sharon's food bank included aspects from all three models.

knowledge from people who have historically been excluded from decision-making in charitable food organizations.

Operationalizing equity for producers. Food banks' missions commonly emphasize their role in serving or responding to the needs of people who are experiencing hunger by providing them with food or ending hunger (see Chapter 3). These missions rarely focus on food banks as supporters of food producers. Despite such missions largely targeting food consumers, several food banks primarily measured implementation of equity at the producer level.

At the 2022 Food ACCESS Conference, held by the California Association of Food Banks, the Alameda County Community Food Bank, based in Oakland, CA, led a workshop titled "Operationalizing Equity." In it, administrators of the food bank detailed how they implemented a focus on equity in their food purchasing strategy. They said that equity work had been occurring at the organization for over a decade, but a new strategy emerged following discussions in 2020 on George Floyd's murder and anti-Asian sentiments. The new strategy focused on purchasing produce from BIPOC farmers, where farmers and laborers are being paid fairly. Several other presentations discussed purchasing food from BIPOC producers, representing an important shift to equity regarding food production. Food banks are increasingly focusing on equity during production in the food system, rather than consumption, which is a strategy less clearly aligned with their missions. The USDA is also focusing on producer equity over consumer equity in their new LFPA program that provides local food to food banks. The USDA is hoping to target "socially disadvantaged producers," though there is no requirement that food must be purchased from "socially disadvantaged" farmers (USDA 2022a).

Alameda County Community Food Bank administrators said that food sourced from BIPOC farmers is culturally relevant to food bank clients (Jaffe, 2023), but the food bank's

metric for operationalizing equity focused on food sourcing. Farmworkers have very low wages and high rates of food insecurity (Minkoff-Zern, 2014), and this food bank paid attention to farm labor conditions. However, other food banks that used similar metrics for food purchasing considered only the producer's position. The omission of operationalized equity in relation to food access at the workshop was notable since the food bank "passionately pursues a hunger-free community" as its mission (The Alameda County Community Food Bank Inc, 2021). The administrators I interviewed struggled to operationalize what measuring equity looks like for food consumption. Many mentioned inequities in food insecurity and poverty rates, but fewer provided ways that they were working to resolve them. In prior research, I found that food bank distributions are inequitable because they are designed to serve unencumbered clients (Haynes Stein, 2023). However, many approaches to equity failed to address clients' experiences.

Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, pointed out that the logic of the food bank model is compromised when food banks shift to purchasing food. He claimed that the justification for purchasing food is based on racialized paternalism, arguing:

> Why the hell am I buying the food? Why don't I give you the money and you buy the food? But I tell you, most people don't want to do that. They don't want to treat that person like an adult…. Whatever they're gonna do, obviously they're doing it because that's what they've determined as an adult that's best for their family. But there's a paternalism that, frankly, often has a racial basis. (Scott, 2021)

He argued that food banks make sense as a distributor of excess food, but the growing model of food banks purchasing food instead of giving clients money perpetuates paternalistic ideals that have long undergirded the traditional charity model. His argument of racially based paternalism in the private food assistance system corroborates de Souza's (2019) research on the racialized stigma that food pantries perpetuate and other research on the historical earmarking of charitable assistance (Katz, 2013; Zelizer, 1997).

New metrics that measure equity through food banks' roles in supporting food producers represent a shift in the logic of food banking. The shift is from a model of redistributing excess food to one in which food banks become food purchasers that seek to make ethical decisions to reduce systemic inequities in food production. In creating these metrics, food banks were concerned about who owned the businesses from which they purchased, and they supported locally produced food when purchasing it. These metrics measure some outputs of how food banks are using their buying power to redress systemic inequities in food production, aligning with parts of the food justice movement that use institutional purchasing power to create a more equitable food system (Lo & Koenig, 2017). In this way, equitable food purchasing metrics reduce systemic inequities in the food system, but they do not measure equity in food banks' primary role as food and service providers. These metrics were not directly about ending hunger or food insecurity. Organizations outside food banking that enacted food justice through food purchases paid attention to food system labor and low wages (Lo & Koenig, 2017). However, the purchasing metrics I observed in food banks typically focused on the race/ethnicity of the owner, rather than workers' labor conditions (the Alameda County Community Food Bank focused on both). Although farm and food system labor practices were largely ignored in discussions of metrics during the interviews, the administrators did pay attention to working conditions in their own organizations.

Measuring Workplace Success

Nonprofit success was often tied in some way to food distribution, hunger, and inequality, but food bank administrators also emphasized their roles as employers and fostering a quality workplace culture. When asked about his food bank's measures of success, Craig, a Feeding America food bank CEO, reported that the workplace environment was important in

addition to metrics tied to their mission, which had components of the traditional charity and personal responsibility models. He said:

> I also measure the success on, Do we have a safe and comfortable work environment for our staff? I'm going to go back to the people part of that operating strategy. We got a great team, a great staff, and it has been a really, really hard year, for our communities, our country, but our food bank staff too has been pushed really hard. (Craig, 2021)

Craig emphasized difficulties with Covid-19 in a workplace that ramped up instead of shut down. These metrics did not tie directly to their missions, but they did reflect the role of food banks as employers, which is particularly relevant to missions when food banks begin considering ways that their own employment practices perpetuate the exploitative systems they seek to redress.

For some food banks, internal workplace metrics sought to address systemic inequities. Tracy, vice president at a Feeding America food bank with a mission of ending hunger, described how her food bank developed new metrics to measure equity in the workplace. She said, "It's an evolution...that was started here prior to George Floyd's murder, but I think [it] was heightened because of that" (Tracy, 2021). Tracy described how this was operationalized:

> The changes really are thinking about: How do we spend money? Where do we spend money? Are there ways to spend money on BIPOC businesses?... How are we hiring people? What do we put in our job application? Where do we recruit people from? How do we not only retain people but make sure that we're promoting people. We've created internal policies to think about professional development and making sure that we're supporting people and thinking really creatively about childcare and thinking creatively about... So I think it's changed how we do business, both externally and internally... It became a pillar of our strategic plan. (Tracy, 2021)

Tracy also highlighted a combination of policies that addressed the producers from whom the food bank was purchasing and workplace policies that support marginalized groups as her food bank's current operationalization of equity. She said they still have "a lot of work to continue to do" in their pursuit of equity (Tracy, 2021).

Equity-focused internal metrics and policies could change the working conditions of food bank staff members, reducing their own experiences of economic precarity. Raymond, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described how his food bank revisited their conceptions of being a successful employer in the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement by hiring the services of professional DEI consultants (Raymond, 2021). Raymond said:

> I sat in on all of our listening sessions, and I heard stories from our teammates of color that made me cry. They were just devastating to me…. We changed all of our equity practices around pay/ benefits. We were pretty good to begin with, but we invested heavily, and everybody here now is paid to market or above... And we have done any number of things to make sure that our teammates know that we're investing in their equity so that they have voiced capability. We also have built out other response mechanisms, so we have a DEI group now that meets on a regular basis that holds us accountable to the standards that we think are important. (Raymond, 2021)

In response to learning of the experiences of his own staff, Raymond's food bank increased pay and benefits while building accountability measures to an internal DEI group. It was also "working actively to rectify" the lack of diversity among senior leaders and on the board, but it had not yet achieved this (Raymond, 2021). By incorporating internal accountability regarding equity, the food bank was improving the economic situation of its staff members and working to create more equitable decision-making throughout the organization. Involving people who have been marginalized, particularly those who have experienced hunger, in decision-making pushes food banks further toward the systemic change model (Sherman, 2022). This corresponded to Raymond's food bank's mission, which included an emphasis on ending hunger.

Measuring Nonprofit Legitimacy

The administrators described the metrics they use to demonstrate their legitimacy as a nonprofit. They drew on metrics established in food banking, nonprofit, and business sectors to signal legitimacy. For Feeding America food banks, such metrics included whether they were

meeting Feeding America's requirements for MPIN. Other metrics included the proportion of donations used for overhead and certifications on websites that rate nonprofits.

Feeding America began requiring food banks to account for need and space-based food distribution quotas in 2011 (Lohnes, 2019). Its county-level Pounds per Person In Poverty metric was replaced in 2014 by Meals per Person In Need, which required converting pounds to meals and uses Feeding America's own food insecurity data to indicate need (MPIN) (Lohnes, 2019). MPIN target numbers have grown consistently and were tied to 50% of the median of all Feeding America food banks (Lohnes, 2019), but they have since been adjusted to reflect targets based on a food bank's own services (Lowcountry Food Bank, 2023). MPIN and the Map the Meal Gap came up in 32% of interviews. Cynthia reported that she was using MPIN as a metric for her food bank because it was a Feeding America guideline:

> We have some guidelines from Feeding America as to our goal, as to how many people in poverty and how much we should be supporting them. So that's one of our benchmarks. We have [multiple] counties that we cover, and right now, we are serving at least 50% of those people in [75% of] counties, which that's almost double what we were doing seven, eight years ago, so we're getting there. (Cynthia, 2021)

This metric pushed food banks to be cognizant of the needs in their service areas, though county-level measures often did not provide precise insights into food banks' spatial allocation of food. In comparison to pounds distributed, MPIN reflected responsiveness to need so that it could not be manipulated to report that a lower value also represented success. Tiffany, vice president of a Feeding America food bank with a mission of providing food and ending hunger, emphasized the benefits of using MPIN for this purpose, stating:

> So, in addition to pounds distributed, we look at MPIN as well, to make sure those pounds are allocated properly…[because] it measures the need for one. So, we know, for instance, if you have a year where you've maybe distributed less [pounds of food], you can go a step further and see: has the need changed in your areas? Are the programs working? So it provides for a level of program analysis. (Tiffany, 2022)

MPIN was thus used to legitimate food banks to Feeding America and make the pounds metric partially responsive to need. Still, the administrators emphasized improving this metric by increasing the pounds of food they distributed rather than reducing levels of need. Meeting MPIN thresholds was required for maintaining Feeding America status, and it was comparable on a dashboard to other food banks (Lohnes, 2019). Food banks used this metric to signal their organization's legitimacy in the industry.

Other legitimacy metrics measured finances. A few administrators considered themselves successful if they raised enough money to remain solvent. Others had a highly rationalized focus on efficiency, seeking to limit overhead. People who make large donations to nonprofits have customized demands, but smaller donors are typically interested in organizational efficiency (Mosley, 2020). They base efficiency assessments not on outcomes, but on reducing overhead, which are expenses such as infrastructure, payroll, and operations (Mosley, 2020). Low overhead is part of the way websites such as Charity Navigator rate nonprofits (Mosley, 2020). The administrators considered both efficiency measured in this way and their standing on such websites to be a measure of success. Craig, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a mission that incorporated traditional charity and personal responsibility components, said:

> Ninety-six cents of every dollar donated gets to the table, and that's really impressive. My peer groups, I'm really, really excited for them, too, but they're 92, 93, 94 cents…. We just got our four-star rating with Charity Navigator, so Charity Navigator is another measure. (Craig, 2021)

These metrics do not reflect food banking; they are generalized metrics that apply to any nonprofit organization, and they were meant to signal legitimacy, not mission-specific success.

Signaling legitimacy, nevertheless, impacted other metrics that food banks used. Gabe, director at an independent food bank with a traditional charity mission, reported that he could

invest in more metrics beyond pounds of food distributed, number of people served, and feedback from partner agencies. However, he feared it would undermine legitimacy by directing funds away from programming. Explaining why he used limited metrics, he said, “We're trying to be good stewards of every dollar that we bring in” (Gabe, 2022). He said that he could not justify spending money on better metrics, particularly through contracted companies, when that money could be spent in other ways. Gabe’s example highlights not only that food banks use metrics to establish legitimacy, but that they also limit them to maintain legitimacy with donors.

Influences on Food Bank Metrics

Metrics sometimes aligned with food banks’ missions, but the three mentioned most in interviews—pounds of food (n=59), number of people served (n=36), and nutrition (n=28)—did not correspond with ending hunger or poverty, despite these being core aspects of most food banks’ mission statements. Metrics that aligned more closely with ending hunger and poverty, such as measuring client satisfaction (n=18) and rates of food insecurity, poverty, and community need (n=25), were less common. Since metrics shape how organizations operate, it is important to explore what influenced food bank metrics to heavily emphasize nutrition and count-based outputs measures. These types of metrics are represented across food bank organizations in my sample. My research suggests that these metrics were spread through coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic processes.

At the time of my research and interviews, food banks were just beginning to adopt programs and metrics that sought to address the root causes of hunger, but the metrics they used to measure success still largely reflected their legacy of redistributing food waste. They continued to reflect their gleaning roots while being shaped by demands from the government, donors, and the Feeding America Network. I build on extant research that assesses isomorphism

in nonprofits, using current findings to explain mismatches between missions and metrics. I detailed how such pressures are influencing change at food banks, but there is also countervailing pressure to maintain the status quo.

The administrators characterized the metrics they used and their pursuit of new metrics as driven by Feeding America and funders' requirements, as well as attempts to legitimize themselves to donors and the public. These influences resulted in a variety of metrics that largely failed to evaluate food banks' efforts to measure success at ending hunger and its root causes. Kevin, CEO at a Feeding America food bank whose mission aligned with all three models, explained how his food bank's metrics historically reflected the interests of those with power—Feeding America and funders. He discussed that only recently had his food bank sought to create metrics that responded to those with less power, stating:

> I think we used to measure success through traditional food banking metrics that the Feeding America network has had in place forever. And that's like pounds in, dollars in, and pounds/dollars out, dollars used, and stuff like that. And that's fine. We still track stuff like that because we're part of larger networks or because some funders request that. I think what we've come to understand, in the last, and this is only [the] last 18 months of reworking our dashboard, is, "What are the metrics that are important to community members and to the practitioners, the frontline staff interacting with community members?" (Kevin, 2021)

Kevin reported that his food bank was obligated to use metrics that Feeding America and funders requested, but that it was trying to focus more on metrics that are important to communities that are experiencing hunger and the staff members who most regularly interact with them. Kevin also highlighted that new metrics featured qualitative data on people's experiences with using food bank services and developing political power (Kevin, 2021). His comments exemplified how food banks are pressured by those with power to use specific metrics.

Government regulations had effects that extended far beyond the programs they governed. Regulations regarding TEFAP were often implemented throughout food bank programs, requiring agencies to track who uses the program (typically through signatures, a requirement that was waived during the pandemic) and to keep records to demonstrate that the organization is not wasting food during distribution (USDA, 2017). Such requirements led administrators to track pounds of food served and count people who were accessing programs. I asked Andrea, executive director of an independent food bank with a mission that contained parts of all three models, why her food bank measured success using number of people served and pounds of food distributed. She reported using count-based metrics despite wanting to shift to relationship-based and community-based ones (Andrea, 2022). She responded:

> The USDA does require a lot of tracking of numbers in poundage and stuff…. And plus, we wanna make sure that we're being accountable to our funders and to our board, so making sure that we're counting everything that goes in and out, that we're doing as much as possible to reduce food waste all the time. (Andrea, 2022)

Since food banks already had the infrastructure, including scales and reporting software, to track them, count-based metrics were generally implemented throughout the organization. Eight administrators also implemented TEFAP's client eligibility requirements for all, or nearly all, of their food assistance programs. Their mimicry of these requirements led to replication of barriers throughout public and private social safety nets, and thus participants who were ineligible for or who were deterred by the USDA's program requirements were also unable to access private food assistance. Some administrators reported that they did so because they mixed TEFAP food with food from other sources, but other food banks kept food separate and yet still mimicked TEFAP requirements. The enclosure of food bank donations in federal tax policy has far-reaching effects on food not being claimed as tax donations (Lohnes, 2021). Tax policy

requires that such food not be resold, and requires food banks to implement accounting measures, often conducted through pound-based inventory systems.

The influence of private funders and donors was ubiquitous throughout the food bank network as food banks procured sufficient resources to meet the distant goal of demand. When I asked Raymond, CEO at a Feeding America food bank with a mission of providing food and ending hunger, about decision-making behind his food bank's metrics, he mentioned mimicking broader public health focuses on nutrition and appealing to funders. He said, "Over time, we've continued to try and mature our viewpoint of what success looks like. I think granters also are forcing many organizations like ours towards that behavior" (Raymond, 2021) Raymond distinguished two types of donors, saying, "There is a giver who just wants to support the cause, and there's a philanthropist that wants to change their community" (Raymond, 2021). He said that "the giver" just wants to know "a family is fed," but "a philanthropist wants to move markers in communities" (Raymond, 2021). Raymond described how this drove food banks to impact-based metrics, since philanthropists consider their funding to be a "social investment" (Raymond, 2021). This shift occurred over the past 20 years as corporations became more cause-focused in their philanthropy (Raymond, 2021).

Food banks therefore measured success using donor criteria, rather than best addressing missions and community needs. Gabe, director at an independent food bank with a traditional charity mission, reported that historically, his food bank's metrics were driven by donors. When asked why his food bank used the metrics of numbers of meals and partner agencies, he stated that the metrics came about circumstantially:

> Historically, different departments have asked for that throughout [our food bank's] history. So, if we have a corporate donor relations team whose job it is to get us donated product, they will say, "Hey, our donors want to know how many meals we fed with their

> food." So, sometimes that's just been sort of a historical progression, and we've ended up with these goals as a result. However, we've had to be a lot more strategic, I think, recently in saying, "Okay, what do we actually wanna know? What are the numbers that we actually want and can use, and that are gonna make an impact in our messaging?" (Gabe, 2022)

Gabe's food bank had only recently turned to strategic planning to determine what metrics it wants to use and supports its message best (Gabe, 2022).

The National Feeding America Organization operated as a funder, contract holder, and accreditor in the U.S. food bank network. It is obligated by its own funder requirements, which it must pass on to member food banks (Bouek, 2018a). Food banks passed the requirements they received from Feeding America, the government, and funders to partner agencies, replicating the influence of these metrics. Feeding America acts as funder, administering grants to member food banks and steering the direction of programs and metrics. Through its accumulation of donation contracts with national donors, Feeding America also controls access to many of the largest food corporations' donations, which pressures food banks to meet requirements for being part of the network. If food banks do not meet required MPIN metrics, they can be placed on probation and ultimately lose their status as a Feeding America food bank (Lohnes, 2019). The administrators reported ways the National Feeding America Organization acted as a professional association, hosting conferences, webinars, and working groups to distribute best practices.

Metrics were replicated as administrators met regularly at conferences, state associations, working groups, webinars, and informal meetings to share and compare practices. George, director at a Community Action Agency that runs an independent food bank, shared how metrics were diffused at food bank conferences:

> The measure that we all use is pounds of food distributed. And we go to food bank conferences, everybody puffs up and measures their size by how many pounds of food

> they distribute. Now, we do know that that doesn't say a lot other than we've met people's immediate need in that moment, but what has that done long term? (George, 2021)

George discussed how metrics spread at conferences, even though administrators knew that they did not measure outcomes. Client-based measures were also diffused at conferences. Victor, CEO of a different Community Action Agency that runs an independent food bank, described how his organization used client feedback and needs assessments to measure success. Asked how his food bank came to use these metrics, he said:

> We stole them from others [Victor chuckled] because you know part of our anti-poverty network includes other organizations all across the country. So, we're not the only ones who were involved in doing this, these kinds of things. Other smarter people have come up with ways. (Victor, 2021)

The examples from Victor and George demonstrate how metrics spread in professional networks. Both administrators worked at Community Action agencies that operate food banks, but George described how pound-based measures spread at conferences, and Victor described how client-focused metrics spread in anti-poverty organizations.

Technology also helped to spread metrics as food banks developed, used, and shared software. Software encouraged food banks to collect detailed client data. Administrators at both state food bank associations and food banks reported how they adopted new software and pressured partner agencies to do the same. Collecting data did not, however, necessarily mean that administrators used them to inform decision-making or evaluate success. Brandon, vice president at an independent food bank, discussed the software his food bank uses to collect client data. Despite using the software to track detailed information that clients provide through paperwork, he reported that his food bank does not use the data to inform decision-making:

> We don't use the data. I mean, I'll be honest. We collect it, and we look at our numbers and see how we're growing that way and how many people we're serving that way. But we don't look at it and say, "Well, what do we wanna do next year?" We figure out from

> what we see every day on the street what we're gonna do next year, and then we go do it. (Brandon, 2022)

His interview also demonstrated how the pursuit of data becomes a goal itself. Several months into the pandemic, his food bank stopped offering contactless drive-through programs so that clients would begin filling out applications again. He said, “We needed to collect that data, and we couldn't do it without those applications” (Brandon, 2022). Brandon’s food bank was rare in that it did not focus on metrics beyond number of people served, but his honesty reflected how metrics get spread through technological systems, even when they are not used during decision-making.

Food bank metrics were influenced by those with the power to enforce and fund, such as the government, food bank donors, and the National Feeding America Organization. Such pressures were occasionally met with resistance. Andrea, executive director of an independent food bank, described how her food bank resisted funders’ increasing demands for quantitative metrics (Andrea, 2022). Her food bank still used quantitative metrics for its in-kind food programs, but the food bank decided to take a different approach for evaluating its programs focused on systemic inequities. She said, “The funders that we're working with need to trust us to do the work that we're doing without requiring all of those kind[s] of quantitative data reporting at the end” (Andrea, 2022). She measured success by building community and relationships, for which they were able to obtain funding from philanthropists and foundations (Andrea, 2022).

Metrics were seldom developed based on the needs or interests of the marginalized populations that the food banks served. They spread as food banks copied one another and food bank professionals exchanged practices at conferences and meetings. Food bank administrators

also brought new metrics with new emphases as they moved between nonprofit and corporate sectors.

Conclusion

Food bank metrics represent an important method of external and internal accountability, and yet food banks often used measures that do not correspond with the root causes of hunger or poverty. They instead often relied on outcome-based measures such as the pounds of food they distributed and the number of people they had served. These metrics provide some information on food bank's largescale efforts at alleviating hunger but failed to capture their impact on ending hunger. Food banks in my sample also frequently used nutrition-based metrics, which align with the models of traditional charity and personal responsibility. They promoted metrics that purportedly addressed the underlying causes of hunger but that ultimately reflected their ideas about poverty being the result of individual shortcomings. Metrics that aligned with the systemic change model were newer, and food banks struggled to measure what equity looked like in social service provision and amongst people experiencing hunger – instead focusing on measuring equity in which food producers they supported.

I traced where food bank metrics originated and how they spread through organizationally based isomorphic pressures, which took two main forms: coercive and mimetic. Firstly, food bank metrics were impacted by coercive isomorphic pressures from the government, donors, and the National Feeding America Organization based on the demands these bodies made on them. Secondly, metrics were also influenced by mimetic isomorphic pressures as food banks copied one another and sought to achieve industry best practices. These led to industry metrics that did not parallel common claims made by food banks in their mission statements regarding ending hunger and addressing the root causes of poverty. Rather, the metrics most food

banks relied on to measure their “success” revealed their responsiveness to those they depended on for resources, while largely ignoring those who were experiencing hunger.

During my research in the COVID-19 pandemic, food banks were beginning to measure effectiveness in addressing the structural root causes of hunger and responding to the needs and desires of the people they served. These changes were accelerated as food banks addressed a growing, widespread public demand for organizations of all kinds to address equity and accountability during the COVID-19 pandemic and following the murder of George Floyd. This was an important turn of events, as food banks are respected community institutions that shape both policy and public opinion regarding hunger and poverty. In this regard, food banks are demonstrating their potential to engage in systemic change, leading to a more just society. However, their efforts to do so are heavily influenced by the legacy of a history that did not emphasize equity or the needs of people who are experiencing hunger. Food banks have the potential to leverage substantial power through their more than 60,000 partner agencies, billions of dollars of resources, and the many clients, donors, volunteers, and policymakers who interact with them regularly. Whether food banks use this power to help eliminate hunger and poverty effectively remains to be seen. In Chapter 5, I detail how food banks politically frame their efforts and engage in political activity.

Chapter 5. Hunger for Change: Food Banks' Political Framing and Actions

Abbreviations

501(c)(3): A class of tax-exempt nonprofit organization outlined in Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3)

ARPA: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

CARES Act: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020

CFAP: Coronavirus Food Assistance Program

CSFP: The Commodity Supplemental Food Program

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

EBT: Electronic Benefit Transfer (Pandemic EBT was a federal response to Covid-19 designed to fill the gap caused by closed schools not providing school meals)

IRS: Internal Revenue Service

LFPA: Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program

SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

TEFAP: The Emergency Food Assistance Program

WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Nonprofit charitable organizations, especially 501(c)(3) nonprofits, are commonly portrayed to the public as apolitical organizations that generously service the public good (Clemens, 2020). Food banks have similarly been promoted by politicians and food bank administrators as an apolitical model that addresses hunger and inequality. Yet the political orientations of food banks are critical since many (58% of those interviewed) address ending hunger and poverty in their missions. Still, 78% of food banks' missions focus on their role as

charitable food providers, seeking to alleviate experiences of hunger (detailed in Chapter 3). Food banks are characterized as politically neutral responses to hunger because of limitations tied to their legal 501(c)(3) status and their ability to draw support from a range of political interests from the left and right. However, a pretense of political neutrality obscures the fact that food banking is highly politicized and food banks are, in fact, political.

Advocates of private, nonprofit food banks suggest they provide a public good, using charitable goodwill to deliver food to people in need while forgoing waste by distributing food that corporate food producers would otherwise throw out. Critics argue that the institutionalization of private, nonprofit food banks in the United States has played a part in maintaining the status quo of the market-based system with its weak social welfare policies and extreme inequities (Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes, 2023; Lohnes & Pine, 2023; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2018; Ronson & Caraher, 2016; Spring et al., 2022). Politicians and food bank advocates rely on the false ideal that food banks prevent hunger while supporting social policies that fail to address underlying causes of hunger (Ronson & Caraher, 2016).

Food banks also act on the state's behalf by administrating government programs, further exposing them as inherently political institutions. Food banks are primary distributors of federal commodity and farm support programs, including TEFAP, CFAP, and LFPA (see Chapter 2 for histories of these programs). Food banks account for donations to meet federal guidelines so that donors can receive tax deductions (Lohnes, 2021). Many food banks also have programs that help clients sign up for federal benefits such as SNAP and Medicare. Through these roles, food banks act as extensions of the state, revealing their symbiotic relationship with it (Clemens, 2017) and blurring lines among interest groups, civil society, the commercial sector, and the government. Administering government programs expands the capacity of food banks

dramatically, but it embeds them in public social services administration, a highly politicized facet of government.

Food banks are actively involved in advocacy, including formal and informal political lobbying and marketing campaigns to change public ideas and discourse regarding hunger and poverty. Every food bank administrator interviewed spoke of some form of political action, demonstrating the ubiquity of various kinds of advocacy. Many food banks and food bank associations lobby to maintain, or moderately reform, the current social welfare system that relies on providing in-kind food. These political actions vary in their effectiveness at addressing hunger, but significant change is needed to effectively end hunger. Food banks also lobby for tax changes to increase deductions for monetary and surplus food donations from the industrial food system. This lobbying appears to benefit those in need, but pursuing political change that privileges tax deductions for the wealthy undermines long-term efforts to remedy the root causes of hunger and poverty. However, some food banks are taking more expansive orientations to political advocacy that encourage substantial political and economic change in the distribution of resources and the organization of the food system. These changes include living wages, affordable housing, an expanded social safety net, and sustainable local food systems.

Many food banks that lobby for policies regarding food assistance do not recognize their actions as political. However, when food banks advocate for public and private in-kind food assistance, they contribute to maintaining systemic inequality. Over the past two decades, food banking has grown tremendously, distributing more resources and serving more people than ever (Dickinson, 2019; Feeding America, 2023). TEFAP, the federal commodity program, has likewise grown (Castro, 2022; Daponte & Bade, 2006). Despite increasing food resources, food insecurity has remained constant over the past 20 years, never falling below 10% (Coleman-

Jensen et al., 2022). Some claim that expansion of public social safety net programs and increased public and private food assistance staved off higher rates of hunger during the pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021), but current combined charity and policy approaches in the United States that emphasize in-kind food assistance have not reduced food insecurity over the past few decades (Berg, 2008; Bouek, 2018b; Dickinson, 2019; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018; Lohnes, 2023; Pine, 2020; Poppendieck, 2014b; Rabbitt et al., 2023; Riches, 2018; Spring et al., 2022; Tiehen et al., 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2018). In a review article, Lohnes and Pine (2023) argue that researchers should imagine the political possibilities of food banks to advance social change in support of a more just food system.

The food bank sector is clearly political, reflected in the industry's use of competing political ideals to justify their efforts, its central role in executing state welfare policies, and its overt political advocacy. In this chapter, I draw on empirical investigation to explore these issues and thus how food banks position themselves politically as they seek food and funds for operation. I find that some food banks strive to maintain the status quo, espousing their operations as politically neutral. In contrast, others forgo neutrality and address the root causes of hunger and poverty, thus seeking fundamental social change. I ask and address why some food banks avoid taking political orientations while others do so explicitly, and what the implications are of food banks taking political orientations, as they relate to both feeding food-insecure people and ending hunger. I also explore how, through political positioning and advocacy, some food banks support the status quo by supporting extant policies, while others seek to end hunger through programs that encourage systemic change. I find that food bank administrators' outlooks toward donor recruitment and perceptions of donors' desires play roles in food banks' political stances and activities. A growing minority of food banks have begun to recognize that prior

attempts to maintain political neutrality reinforced the status quo and did not appeal to potential donors who were seeking social change. Such food banks are now taking more overtly politicized orientations as they appeal to donors and funders invested in changing the status quo regarding inequality.

Food Banks' Political Engagement

Food banks must navigate a contentious political environment, but they control how they frame their political work and the types of political work they do. I explore food banks' political choices along three dimensions—political orientation, political actions, and political positioning regarding social change. When expressing their organizations' political orientations, the administrators I spoke with outlined their organization's political orientations on a spectrum, ranging from politically neutral to overtly politicizing their services. Some believe their status as 501(c)(3) nonprofits means they cannot engage in overt political behavior, but food banks, like other private nonprofit organizations, are limited only from explicitly engaging in partisan politics, such as endorsing or funding candidates for office.[25] Yet, many food banks characterize their organizations as politically neutral, while others choose to overtly politicize their work. I found that a food bank's political orientation did not necessarily align with its political actions and lobbying. All the administrators I interviewed described their organization's involvement in some form of political action, despite many also claiming their organization's political neutrality.

Huddart Kennedy et al. (2018, pp. 678–679) frame non-traditional and less formal political approaches in alternative food movements as "small-p politics." In the case of local

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[25] The legal requirements for a 501(c)(3) organization prohibit involvement in political candidates' campaigns but allow them to take a stand on ballot measures and public policy issues (IRS, 2023). 501(c)(3) organizations are also subject to a capped amount of their budget that can be spent to influence legislation or lobby (IRS, 2022).

food movements, small-p politics focus on changing narratives and discourses among consumers (Huddart Kennedy et al., 2018). In food banks, I found that small-p political engagement frequently takes the form of influencing the public's views and opinions regarding hunger and food insecurity. Concerning alternative food movements, Huddart Kennedy et al. (2018, p. 678) argue that small-p politics deploy apolitical narratives to garner support and enlist help in work that people find fulfilling. Small-p politics emphasize how people can participate in a movement enjoyably, rather than prioritizing the movement's ultimate purpose (Huddart Kennedy et al., 2018). I found that food banks similarly deploy a narrative of apoliticism, when they seek to sway public opinion and enlist help from the public through volunteerism and donations. Small-p politics emphasize friendly, pragmatic actions, which contrasts with "Big-P politics" that are overtly ideological and even confrontational (Huddart Kennedy et al., 2018, p. 684). Pine (2020) shows that food assistance volunteers find volunteer work enjoyable and meaningful, even when their work does not lead to long-term changes that could be achieved through Big-P politics. I argue that food banks frequently rely on small-p political frameworks rather than Big-P politics when they enlist millions of volunteers to provide people with food rather than address root causes of hunger, such as by having volunteers advocate for systemic change or paying people living wages to do this labor.

Big-P politics represent formal political action, such as advocating for public policies, engaging elected officials to support organizational objectives, and mobilizing people to vote. Huddart Kennedy et al. (2018) find that small-p political engagement in local food movements leads to cultural change, but they caution that such social movement successes preclude efforts for broader social change. Following their characterization, I explore how food banks' political engagement—small-p and Big-P—either maintains the status quo or promotes social change.

Political actions sit on a continuum from actively supporting the status quo to advocating for social change and engaging in social protest. Those critical of food banks argue that they implicitly support the status quo and, with it, a corporate food system that is highly inequitable (Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes & Pine, 2023; Poppendieck, 2014b; Riches, 2018). The corporate food system considerably influences food banks through board positions and being a major source of food and monetary donations (Fisher, 2017a; Riches, 2018). However, Lohnes and Pine (2023) argue that the potential for food banks to be agents of social change needs further exploration.

When assessing how food bank administrators situated their political orientations and engaged in political actions, I found they reported their agency and participation in many political decisions. While food banks are influenced by donors and the environments in which they operate, they are not simply a product of them. The following sections assess the ways the administrators framed their political orientations and the political actions in which they participated. I thus trace the people, policies, and processes that shape food banks' political decision-making.

Food Bank Political Orientations

Food banks involve extensive numbers of staff members, volunteers, donors, and client networks. Keith, executive director of a Feeding America PDO food bank, discussed his food bank's obligation to use this robust network to take a stand on political issues. After expressing frustrations with lack of attention on living wages, he outlined the moral responsibility of his food bank, stating:

> Something needs to happen, and it needs to happen now. I think there's players that are better positioned to have a greater impact than us as far as changing systems. But we just

> can't sit here and point the finger at them and abdicate the role that we can play in this. (Keith, 2021)

Keith delineated the importance of using his organization's powerful standing and network to take a stand. However, he experienced opposition from elected officials in response to his advocacy for increased wages, stating:

> It really pisses me off that we can't talk about this in public without blowback from governmental officials, and me getting calls late at night from electives saying, "Hey, how dare you make comments like that in public." (Keith, 2021)

He questioned how his advocacy could be considered bad as he sought to end poverty. For fear of pushback, other administrators shied away from politicizing their industry and work, instead downplaying their political involvements and framing their political orientation as politically neutral. Claims of political neutrality in my interviews with food bank administrators took two forms —apolitical or bipartisan.

In my interviews, many of the administrators framed how their nonprofit positions itself concerning politics, what I call their "political orientation," which reflects how the administrators positioned their nonprofit's politics, not their personal politics. Administrators characterized their nonprofits' political orientations as politicized or politically neutral, the latter of which included distinct apolitical or bipartisan frames. When classifying administrators' political orientations, I used statements or discourse regarding orientations instead of actions because I found these two did not align entirely. Of the 62 food banking administrators, 36 articulated their organizations' political orientations in interviews.[26] All 62, however, spoke of political actions. Despite all administrators mentioning some form of political work, two-thirds of those who articulated a

[26] The interview guide did not include a question that asked about political orientation explicitly. These 36 interviews were ones during which administrators brought up political orientation as they addressed other questions.

political orientation suggested that their organization's work was politically neutral (n=24), invoking narratives of either apoliticism (n=14) or bipartisanship (n=10). Those who reported both apolitical and bipartisan orientations claimed some form of political neutrality. However, those with a bipartisan orientation acknowledged active but supposedly neutral political engagement, while those with an apolitical orientation distanced their organizations from politics altogether. Nearly half (n=17) of the 36 administrators who defined their political orientations framed their organizations as politicized. Five characterized their organizations as both politically neutral and politicized, highlighting the paradoxical relationship between political framing and action.[27]

Across my interviews, food bank administrators shared that their organizations engaged in distinct political orientations to food banking, which they used to frame and justify their effort. Those with an apolitical orientation sought to frame food banking as separate from the political sphere and policymaking. In general, administrators with bipartisan orientations recognized the politicized nature of their work, striving to navigate a polarized political climate by appealing to both sides, and in doing so, seemingly remain politically neutral.

In contrast, administrators with an explicitly politicized orientation acknowledged that hunger and inequality are inherently politicized issues in the United States, and they committed to address them in this context. They used their organizational mission and value statements to justify political engagement, which typically aligned with leftist policies and platforms regarding poverty and universal rights to basic necessities. In what follows, I detail the political

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[27] Four administrators described bipartisan and politicized orientations, and one reported that the organization wants to be apolitical but still expresses a political position.

orientations that emerged from the interviews, demonstrating how they influenced administrators' framing of hunger and poverty, and their organizations' strategies for addressing them in the political arena.

An Apolitical Orientation to Food Banking

Many administrators sought to minimize the political aspects of hunger, inequality, and their organization's efforts to feed those in need. Those who expressed an apolitical orientation to food banking fell into one of two categories. In the first group, apolitical orientation was characterized by failure to acknowledge the political nature of their food bank's efforts to maintain the status quo, as reflected in their support of existing public policies and dominant narratives on hunger. The second group recognized the politicized environment of food banking and yet continued to frame food distribution, poverty alleviation, and policy work as apolitical, appealing to popular conceptions of charities as politically neutral. Fourteen administrators claimed that their food banks were apolitical or nonpartisan nonprofit organizations. For instance, Todd, executive director an independent food bank, invoked his organization's status as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt to claim that it could not be political, stating: "Legally, the US government says to be a 501(c)(3), you're supposed to be apolitical, which we are, and we do" (Todd, 2022). This apolitical narrative focuses on politics construed colloquially as limited to elections of individuals to office or national political parties. Todd is correct that 501(c)(3) status constrains the kind of politics in which a nonprofit organization can engage, such as supporting a candidate or party for office, but it does not stipulate that it cannot be political, and it even allows direct lobbying on ballot measures and legislation.

When I probed in interviews for a deeper understanding of food banking organizations' relationships with policymakers and government programs, nearly all the administrators

described how their food bank engaged with and sought favors from elected officials and, furthermore, supported or sought to influence government policies. Claims of being apolitical were thus problematic because they obscured how these organizations formally and informally relate to politics and the influence they have on policymaking and policy administration. Suggesting that food banking is apolitical while seeking to support and influence the extant political order is not "apolitical." What is more, this is obviously at odds with addressing hunger, poverty, and inequality at the systemic level since it supports the status quo. This is apparent in the actions and operations of food banks that pursued so called apolitical orientations. For example, when administrators minimized the political nature of their work, their food banks were more likely to pursue strategies that reinforced the status quo, such as upholding and expanding existing food assistance policies rather than addressing poverty and inequality at its roots.

In my sample, the food banks that pursued an apolitical orientation maintained the status quo by limiting their participation in advocating for social change. They tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, upheld the current system where more than 10% of the population is food insecure. Food banks' fatalism and acceptance of existing inequality was addressed directly in an interview with Stacy, executive director of a Christian food bank, who admitted that she ignored politics.[28] She recognized the political nature of food insecurity and hunger, and that other food banks are working to make changes. In response, she reported her food bank's viewpoint regarding serving those in need, sharing how her food bank's orientation is rooted in Christian ideas of service that expect inequality to exist, so her organization will operate for the "long

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[28] Most food banks are not religious organizations, though some independent food banks have religious missions and values. Nearly all food banks work with religious organizations as partner agencies, with two-thirds of Feeding America's partner agencies being religious (Feeding America, 2017).

haul" (Stacy, 2022). Her food bank clearly follows the traditional charity model (see Chapter 2) when serving those in need, focusing on providing food rather than creating social change:

> So we don't dabble as much in the politics, and so sometimes I feel like I just need to turn a bit of a blind eye to it because my faith mission tells us to continue to serve.… It is a political issue, to some degree, but our faith, I think, trumps that for our mission of what we're doing, and we just need to continue to serve, and that's what we feel called to do, regardless of the political side of it. There's plenty of politics on food.… But we're here for the long haul; just continue to provide for the needs. (Stacy, 2022)

Beyond providing assistance, apolitical food banks avoided controversial issues that might undermine appeal to donors and politicians. Greg, director of a Feeding America food bank, took this position, stating, "We try and stay really nonpartisan. And even on issues where the issue is nonpartisan and the vote might go either way, that stuff's all gotten really touchy" (Greg, 2021). He further shared that the network relies on its state food bank association to do most policy outreach, limiting formal political advocacy to meetings between the CEO and legislators in an effort to maintain appeal to donors. Greg and his food bank's apolitical claims strongly contrast with his expressed views on solving hunger. When I asked Greg about the effects of contemporary politics on his food bank, he said, "They're generating poverty faster than we can address it.… We're just putting on dressings on battle wounds—gaping wounds—wounds that are killing people" (Greg, 2021). However, he said that in the current political climate, even basic premises, such as a desire to eradicate poverty and inequality, have become highly politicized. Administrators who reported an apolitical orientation sought to overcome politicized contexts by invoking moral narratives of who "deserves" assistance.

Apoliticism and the "Deserving" and "Undeserving Poor." When food bank administrators claimed that their work was apolitical, it was often associated with a traditional charity model (see Chapter 2) and the importance of feeding people experiencing hunger, rather

than working to end food insecurity and poverty. As food banks sought to appeal to funders and donors through apolitical orientations, some strategically limited how they framed the scope of their food and resource provision to appeal to dominant moral positions on poverty in the U.S. (For further discussion of these moral positions, see Chapter 2.)

Brenda, a Feeding America food bank CEO, focused her discourse on children as she explained the apolitical nature of her food bank's work. In interviews, seven other administrators also focused their discourse on populations considered "deserving" of assistance when attempting to depoliticize their organizational strategies. When asked about the effects of politics on her food bank, Brenda depoliticized her food bank's work by drawing attention to the universal support that feeding children receives across the political spectrum, rather than emphasizing the work her food bank does serving people of all ages. By limiting her discourse to the "deserving poor" rather than discussing the need for universal support, she undermined the idea that no person should go hungry, regardless of age:

> Alana: How do contemporary politics affect your food bank?
> Brenda: We try to not have involvement in…. We try to maximize the relationships that we know we need, and really, food insecurity is usually not partisan. You know, people like to feed kids if there's hungry kids, and you can demonstrate a need. We receive support from all kinds of organizations and political sides and groups, and I think that's universal. Again, a neighbor needing help and not having enough food shouldn't be politicized. (Brenda, 2021)

Brenda reported that she believes everyone deserves assistance if they require it, which she added should not be politicized. However, her initial appeal to the universal desire to help children suggested that her food bank's efforts focus narrowly on food insecure children rather than its mission of servicing all people who are experiencing hunger in its region. One effect of the appeal to feeding children is downplaying the rampant hunger that exists in other populations

while supporting more services for a population (i.e., children) that public social service programs already care for heavily.

Greg, whose role included building partnerships and strategic decision-making at a food bank that has an apolitical orientation, explained that the rationale behind his food bank's use of various narratives was based on societies' moral conceptions of poverty and deservingness. He expressed that feeding children receives popular support, which he then contrasted with hypothetical examples that he thought would drive donors away and "negatively affect the bottom line" of his food bank due to its conservative location:

> Because of the politicized nature of what we do and how we do it, there's so much that's tied to rhetoric…. There's so much that's tied to issues that aren't even about food that really would impact what we're doing. I mean, if I had a picture, for example, of a couple who was a same-sex couple, to a certain degree, that would drive our donations and support in a negative way. But not having one. In what ways is that also driving it in the other direction? (Greg, 2021)

Greg was challenged by how these moralized and politicized narratives impacted his donations. He provided another example of donors' racialized expectations regarding food recipients. He explained that donors expected BIPOC populations to be food bank recipients, but were uncomfortable seeing them as volunteers in food bank imaging. Greg stated, "We have that problem when it comes to things around race because it's acceptable [to the public] for them to be accepting donations, but the idea that they're also handing out donations, this creates tensions" (Greg, 2021). Greg's food bank thus fundraises in ways that reinforce the status quo regarding public perceptions of deservingness from fear of losing donors.

A Bipartisan Orientation to Food Banking

Administrators who reported a bipartisan orientation sought to appear politically neutral, similar to those with an apolitical orientation. However, unlike apoliticism, a bipartisan

orientation acknowledges hunger's politicization and seeks support from both political parties. This strategic framing also acknowledges dependence on politicians and political elites for funding and support. Bipartisan food banks were still forced to make political decisions even as they strove to maintain political neutrality. Curtis, vice president at a Feeding America food bank, highlighted how the institution of food banking itself walks a political line to appeal to donors and funders from both political parties, since food banks represent a privatization model while providing a social welfare service. He detailed how the food bank model is designed to have bipartisan appeal, stating:

> Food banks are politically neutral in many cases because one side of the aisle usually sees the food bank as a private sector answer to a problem, where the other side of the aisle may see food banking as a social service organization solving a problem. So in many ways, food banks can straddle that line. (Curtis, 2021)

Curtis further discussed how political elites shape food banking by providing funding and supporting legislation that ultimately influences degrees of need. This led him to argue that food banks should take a political position while admitting the constraints of their funding model and the political environment that makes it challenging. Curtis concluded, "Maybe food banks should just take a stand, but it's hard" (Curtis, 2021).

Ron, a Feeding America food bank CEO, corroborated Curtis's sentiments, stating, "My job is to try to really make sure that the Republicans think I'm a good Republican and the Democrats think I'm a good Democrat" (Ron, 2021). However, Ron went on to discuss how frustrating it is to meet with politicians who think programs like SNAP are wasteful (Ron, 2021). Charles, CEO at an independent food bank that has a bipartisan orientation, also reported that his food bank was neutral by engaging with but not supporting either political side, focusing solely on feeding people. Charles said:

> We are Switzerland. And we get equal support from both sides of the aisle, and I have had to say to a couple elected officials during this past year, you know, we don't lean left, and you know we don't lean right, we only lean forward. We lean towards feeding people. (Charles, 2021)

Despite Charles's claims that his food bank was politically neutral, he still made political decisions when food assistance programs became political pawns. He highlighted his dilemma as he attempted to maintain legitimacy and appease funder requirements from the Trump Administration.

Letters from Trump. Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, food assistance organizations found themselves at a political crossroads when the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) became a pawn in the presidential election. I use the case of CFAP, known for its Farmers to Families Box Program, to examine how food bank administrators, trying to adhere to a bipartisan orientation, responded to the presidential election and the politically contentious environment it cultivated. Administrators' differing reactions and justifications for framing their efforts as politically neutral illustrated how politics are inherent in food banking.

CFAP began in April 2020 under the Trump Administration in response to public outcry regarding food being wasted in farmers' fields among widespread economic insecurity (Lohnes, 2021). During the interviews, the administrators had varied opinions about the $32 billion program that was designed to support farmers by funding for-profit intermediaries to construct pre-packaged boxes to distribute local food to food banks. The program was not designed to meet the needs of food banks, but many food banks appreciated the source of fresh produce that the program provided. When Trump demanded letters with his signature be included in the boxes just before the 2020 presidential election, the program became more controversial and politicized

(Bottemiller Evich, 2020).[29] Food banks responded to Trump's demands to include signed letters differently.

Charles framed his food bank's distribution of the boxes with Trump's letter included as upholding its commitment to being neutral. He claimed that distributing the boxes with the letters was his moral obligation, a decision he and his food bank made from fear of losing government support. Charles described this experience with CFAP, stating:

> Some food banks are taking the letter out, some food banks were adding a letter, some food banks are putting a sticker on the side, and we decided not to do anything. Because my fear is—and this is something when you work for a nonprofit, right? Your political views, your political opinions cease to be important if they conflict with what's best for your organization and conflicts with what's best for your service population. So maybe I didn't like the letter, but if you take a letter out and it upsets the federal administration, and then they stopped providing the food boxes, and now my service population is not getting the food boxes. (Charles, 2021)

In contrast, Megan, manager at a Feeding America PDO food bank, described a different approach to the same dilemma. Like Charles, Megan also claimed that her organization has a bipartisan orientation, but she acknowledged that it became embroiled in political issues. Regarding Trump's letters, she described how her food bank chose not to distribute them because doing so violated the 501(c)(3) stipulations of endorsing a political candidate. She explained her food bank's reaction to the letters:

> The Trump Administration tried to put a letter in all the food boxes that, essentially, wanted people to thank his administration for all the work that he had done, which also was the same year as an election year…. We didn't feel comfortable passing out [this letter], and we were able to work through it. But your food pantry can't hand you a box that has a political candidate's letter in it. (Megan, 2022)

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[29] The letters were no longer part of the program after the election, suggesting the intent of the Trump Administration in including them.

The case of the CFAP boxes and Trump's letter exemplifies how even food banks that strive for political neutrality become involved in politics. Charles's food bank included the letters in the boxes out of fear of political retaliation, while Megan omitted the letters for fear of violating legal restrictions on nonprofits. These food banks had the same orientations with different actions. Their descriptions of the dilemma and reactions to it highlighted the inherently politicized nature of food banking. Surprisingly, both administrators framed the approaches of other food banks as politicized, but neither mentioned any ramifications of their choices, despite worries and differing reactions. Beyond navigating politically contentious situations, food banks also navigated contentious regional politics as they sought donations and financial support.

The Political Geography of Food Banks. I interviewed food bank administrators from across the country from operating in varied regional political contexts. Beyond federal resources and political influence, they also described being influenced by partisan politics at the state, regional, and local levels. State policies have important implications regarding the availability of public social safety net programs and resources that support food banks. TEFAP regulations are determined at the state level, with variations in conditions regarding how and to whom food can be distributed (Feeding America, 2020a). Food banks were also influenced by political alignments between their town and broader service areas. This was especially true for Feeding America food banks because they can only fundraise within their local service area. While independent food banks are not prohibited from fundraising broadly, in my sample they also largely fundraised in the regions they served.

Some of the administrators I interviewed tied their bipartisan orientation to local politics. For instance, Tiffany, vice president of a Feeding America food bank in a liberal city but

conservative state, outlined her food bank's advocacy as reflecting a bipartisan orientation. She discussed the complexity of navigating the politics of her food bank's political context:

> We are an interesting blue dot in a red state, and so we're very conscious of that, and we try to make sure that we are staying mission-focused and what impacts our mission and those that we serve…. Our role is to ensure access to food and that we're helping advance hunger solutions. And so politics plays a role in that, but we try and be as bipartisan as possible and help everyone understand that hunger is not political. And that you can be on both sides of the aisle and still come together on the fact that people should have access to food. There should be nothing political about that. And when there are political conversations about how funding will be spent, or what the SNAP program looks like or WIC, we will raise our hand and get involved and always be an advocate for those people that need access to food. (Tiffany, 2022)

Tiffany recognized the advocacy in which her food bank must engage to frame hunger as a politically neutral issue, demonstrating the political work involved in advocating for people's access to food while appealing to both parties, despite the assertion that access to food should not be politicized. Urban-rural political divides frequently contributed to conflicting regional politics. Since food banks tend to be in urban areas, the administrators frequently discussed political mismatches at urban food banks in conservative states. I also interviewed food bank administrators from conservative and primarily rural towns in liberal states who also spoke of efforts to cross political divides.

Political divides limited the scope of organizations' political work even in liberal states. Adam, executive director of a state food bank association, discussed the changing political contexts that his organization experiences, including its member food banks. He explained that ending hunger is bipartisan, but when addressing the root cause of hunger—poverty—the issue becomes partisan:

> People really do care about not having others go hungry, and so there's a lot of bipartisan buy-in in that general concept…. I think in this current moment, though, when you start thinking well, hunger is a symptom of poverty. Then, to address poverty, it starts becoming more partisan. And so it makes things more delicate in how things are pursued.

> And so things that [our state organization] may advocate for may be more limited in scope to maintain the buy-in that we have. But we can still have a broader scope than maybe some of our member food banks who operate in a different political climate. (Adam, 2021)

Adam highlights a moral conundrum—most do not want people to go hungry, but potential solutions that seek to engage the root causes of poverty and therefore hunger are highly politicized. Fisher (2017a) describes how food banks can rely on state associations to address more politically charged topics, which the administrators corroborated. However, Adam's response highlighted how even state associations limit advocacy to maintain buy-in and with it access to resources, raising concerns about the efficacy of relying on state food bank associations to address more politicized issues. In the next section, I explore food banks that look beyond donor and board pressures to remain politically neutral and thus adopt an explicitly politicized orientation to food banking, advocating for people experiencing poverty.

A Politicized Orientation to Hunger

Recognizing the inherently political nature of hunger in the United States, another group of food bank administrators responded by engaging in an overtly politicized orientation. Those with such an orientation in my interview sample aligned with left-leaning political ideals and policies.[30] As 501(c)(3) nonprofits, food banks cannot legally be partisan organizations, but speaking as individuals, some administrators commented on political parties and candidates during interviews. Administrators at food banks taking a politicized orientation also framed their work as operating within public policy contexts that enabled or constrained their work. Most administrators who framed their organizations as politicized (88%) had mission statements that

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[30] Some administrators advocated for right-leaning policies and approaches, but they framed their work as politically neutral—either apolitical or bipartisan. Food banks from all three orientations operated programs that aligned with conservative ideologies in the models of personal responsibility and traditional charity (Chapter 2).

explicitly supported ending hunger, which was used to justify their political orientation. These food banks engaged in political advocacy to end hunger while also seeking to maintain their legitimacy with donors.

The administrators claimed that being overtly political as a food bank was a recent development, which is echoed in the current research on food banking (Lohnes, 2023). Wendy, an expert in the food bank sector, reported that food banks have historically sought to appear apolitical or bipartisan, but they are now boldly taking political approaches that address inequities:

> Alana: How do you think contemporary politics affect food banking?
> Wendy: I would say historically, not very much, because we were seen as very apolitical, very bipartisan, no one likes hunger, and we just don't talk politics, that's not a nice thing to... I think they were very agnostic to politics purposefully…. I'm encouraged that more food banks are being bold and talking about living wages or equity issues or inequalities, pay inequality, wage inequality, you name it. I think it's easier, though, in a blue state. (Wendy, 2022)

Beyond the general trends that Wendy shared, the juxtaposition of Trump's (2017–2021) and Biden's (2021–current) presidencies was discussed during the interviews. Kim, a Feeding America food bank CEO, highlighted how destructive Trump's presidency was for communities of color, stating:

> Trump was a very difficult President for any food bank that's working on racial justice. I'll just say that and leave it there. And there were a lot of despicable policies that really, really hurt our Black and Brown communities. (Kim, 2021)

Cody, director at a Feeding America PDO food bank, also commented on how Trump's presidency influenced his food bank's ability to serve people who were undocumented and food insecure, stating, "Starting in 2016, upon the election of the Trump Administration into Federal Office, we did see a decline in attendance among some of our undocumented communities" (Cody, 2021). He further described how public confusion and misinformation regarding the food

bank's ties to the government spurred the issue. Barriers to accessing programs for immigrant and undocumented populations, immigration policies, and fear of surveillance came up in nearly one-third of the interviews I conducted.

Another example of food bank administrators taking a politicized orientation involved administrators situating hunger within an inequitable system. Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, highlighted the existence of both hunger and his food bank as a result of the political-economic system. He emphasized that hunger reflects an inequitable system that must be remedied through policy, not food assistance, stating:

> Hunger is a function of food insecurity; food insecurity is a function of poverty; poverty is a function of racism, and then just general economic inequity. If people weren't poor, they wouldn't be food insecure. They wouldn't be coming to us. So, ultimately, we see this as a political-economic question. (Scott, 2021)

By framing hunger as a function of the political-economic system, Scott highlighted the political position his food bank must take to end hunger. Only about half of food bank administrators framed their organizations as having a politicized orientation, but every food bank administrator I spoke with shared that their food bank engaged in either small-p or Big-P politics.

Food Banks' Political Engagement

The food banks were advocating for change to public discourse and policies regarding hunger, poverty, and food banking, including engaging in public informational campaigns, meetings with and petitioning of elected officials, lobbying for public policies, sponsoring ballot initiatives, and even promoting get-out-the-vote initiatives. Indeed, 61 out of 62 (98%) administrators I interviewed talked about their Big-P political work through direct engagement with elected officials or public policy. Indeed, most large food banks have advocacy pages and

calls to action on their websites (Z. Smith, 2022). Clearly, food banks claims of political neutrality do not correspond with their actions.

However, self-declarations of political neutrality did relate to various types and quantities of political engagement. Most administrators who claimed apolitical orientations were involved in Big-P politics, but all claiming bipartisan and politicized orientations were engaged in big-P politics (Table 5.1). Food banks' political framing also corresponded with the types of policies on which they worked. Food banks that claimed apolitical orientations tended to do more policy work that supported the status quo and tied to food assistance directly. Food banks that claimed a bipartisan orientation tended to be more involved in policies for social change than apolitical food bank, focusing on social safety net supports beyond just food. By contrast, politicized food banks most frequently advocated for social justice policies. Below, I detail how food banks' involvement in small-p politics reflects their efforts to influence the cultural narrative of hunger and poverty in the United States. I then assess and compare this with Big-P political efforts that overtly sought to influence elected officials, policy work, and voter initiatives.

Small-p politics and Educating the Public about Hunger and Poverty

Educating and influencing the public's views of hunger and poverty were a common way food banks engaged in small-p politics, though they used different political strategies in such educational campaigns. Apolitical food banks frequently relied on narratives that sought to educate about the existence of hunger and destigmatize hunger by drawing on existing moral narratives of deservingness, such as demonstrating child and senior hunger, and emphasizing how most clients were working. Such narratives maintained the status quo as they sought to educate the public on the existing hunger problem without pointing out how it could be addressed. By contrast, bipartisan and politicized food banks frequently focused on

destigmatizing hunger ,while also pushing to address societal inequalities in their educational campaigns.

Stacy, an independent food bank executive director who shared that she ignored politics, discussed how her food bank was involved in educating the public about hunger and poverty, stating, “Making sure that local folks are educated about food insecurity is a big part of our processes” (Stacy, 2022). She went on to detail her food bank’s efforts to educate those they serve about “healthy food choices” (Stacy, 2022). However, she said that her food bank’s primary focus was connecting people with “wasted food” to “bridge that gap between prosperity and need” (Stacy, 2022). This focus reinforces the existing system of food assistance in the country, which centers on distributing food waste and agricultural surpluses to people in poverty.

Jerry, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described his multi-point approach to hunger and shifting public views. He was one of the administrators who claimed both bipartisan and politicized orientations. He spoke of his food bank’s work as a branding initiative, in which the food bank was “positioning hunger as a[n] issue first and foremost, and then tying the food bank brand to it” (Jerry, 2021). When I asked Jerry about his food bank’s position on hunger, he described its work to undo individualistic narratives that frame hunger as a personal failing, stating:

> The single biggest thing that we try to position hunger is trying to blow away the stereotypes that are held by many people about who's hungry. So a lot of folks have the attitude that these people are lazy or they made bad decisions, it's their fault, they're a problem. (Jerry, 2021)

Jerry’s food bank’s advocacy centered on bringing awareness to hunger and pushing back on conservative, individualistic views of hunger among the public. He still emphasized “deserving” populations of children, the “working poor,” and seniors in his educational

campaigns, but he also pushed for action from the public. Jerry framed his food bank's educational efforts as part of its moral responsibility, saying, "With the knowledge that we have of this population in need, there's a moral obligation to share that with the community in order to get them more involved" (Jerry, 2021). Jerry outlined how he expected the public to change its actions through donations and government spending, saying that hunger "is a social justice issue. There should not be people needing food in this country for a bunch of reasons, and I think checkbooks and budgets are moral documents" (Jerry, 2021). Other administrators from bipartisan food banks also tied public education to efforts to bolster donations.

Framing their efforts as an attempt to change public opinion, politicized administrators challenged narratives on the individual causes of hunger, calling out structural inequities, such as redlining and lack of affordable housing, that contributed and continue to contribute to hunger. Administrators with politicized orientations frequently connected their public education to the issue of systemic racism and calls to change public policy, which was often tied to their own internal DEI efforts. Justin, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a politicized orientation, also spoke about how public beliefs in the myths of food assistance fraud and voter fraud led to discriminatory policies, which he called "the war on poor people" (Justin, 2021). He emphasized the class-based nature of such myths when discussing how his food bank had to dispel them to create policy change. Myths of fraud regarding welfare, food assistance, food stamps, and voting, among others that are close to poverty assistance, have been consistently found to involve racialized tropes (Ray et al., 2023). Such myths are reflected in accusations of "welfare queens" and claims of voter fraud that are frequently levied against people of color and those in poverty (Ray et al., 2023).

Small-p efforts to change public perceptions of hunger and poverty were frequently connected to food banks' engagement in Big-P politics, particularly among food banks with a politicized orientation. In the sections below, I detail the three common forms of Big-P political engagement described in interviews—dialoguing with elected officials, policy work, and building political power through community organizing and voting initiatives.

Big-P Politics and Dialogues with Elected Officials

The food banks participated in formal political work by seeking to directly influence the views of elected officials and policymakers. Speaking about his food bank's bipartisan political advocacy, Jerry, the CEO mentioned above, described how building relationships with state representatives and senators was critical to his advocacy. In his conservative state, Jerry said, "Relationships with our state reps and senators from our area are just really, really important to keep educating them and educating them on what's happening in their district" (Jerry, 2021). He detailed how his food bank used these relationships as it sought to influence the state's TEFAP contract, SNAP availability and funding, and food bank funding provided by the state (Jerry, 2021).

Other food bank administrators described regular interactions with elected officials beyond lobbying. When asked whether his food bank did policy work, Todd, executive director of an independent nonprofit with an apolitical orientation, described regular, casual interactions with local elected officials, stating:

> I have lunch tomorrow with the City Councilman…. Are we involved? Yes. And what I mean by that is we carry, and we utilize many local, city, county, and state grants, okay? So we have to be involved with, specifically, city and county governments all the time. (Todd, 2022)

Similarly, Greg, whose food bank also claimed to be apolitical, described that the CEO meets regularly with state legislators for policy outreach purposes (Greg, 2021). The commonness of references like this in my interviews demonstrates how important formal political work is, even at food banks that claim to be apolitical or bipartisan.

Administrators of food banks with a politicized orientation also spoke of their discussions with elected officials. Compared with food banks with politically neutral orientations, their conversations were more commonly responses to broader changes to the public discourse regarding systemic racism driven by the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and Covid-19. Tracy, vice president at a Feeding America food bank with a politicized orientation, described how changes to public awareness of racism led her to change how she spoke to elected officials. She moved from using color-blind language to language that highlighted how structural racism influences hunger and poverty. She stated:

> When I testified, I [used to] be like, "Hunger doesn't respect age and race and whatever," and I'd sort of do this sort of innocuous speech at the end where I was talking about like, "We all can experience hunger." Which is true, but not necessarily accurate, because while we all experience hunger and while we all could experience hunger ... it doesn't impact us all in the same way... There are racial disparities in food insecurity, and we have to talk about that. (Tracy, 2021)

Tracy went on to tie hunger to racial and gendered structural inequities, highlighting how public policies contribute to inequality. Changing political narratives on social justice allowed administrators like Tracy to be bolder when discussing the structural inequities that lead to hunger and poverty. Similarly, other administrators I spoke with recognized that these discourses were politically contentious, but they still sought to engage politicians in discussions of systemic inequity. Courtney, director at a food bank association with a bipartisan orientation, described how she incorporated the discourse of systemic inequities into her organization’s efforts to

become an anti-racist organization, despite opposition in her conservative state (Courtney, 2021). Justin, CEO at a Feeding America food bank with a politicized orientation, similarly recognized that overtly political actions might be costly, stating:

> We're going to use up whatever we can in terms of our own political clout as an organization. It's well respected and saying, okay, we have capital to burn, let's burn it. Let's use it up to tell the truth. (Justin, 2021)

Many of the administrators I interviewed used dialogues with elected officials in an attempt to influence their views, which my informants suggested also bolstered their formal lobbying of public policies.

Big-P Politics and Policy Work

Most of the food bank administrators I interviewed (97%) claimed that their food banks engaged in local, state, or national policy work (Table 5.1). Most advocated for public policies, but the types they pursued, and their level of engagement, varied. In conversations, they most commonly referred to policy work ambiguously, simply saying they advocated for public policies. When administrators specified their policy work, it generally fell into one of four policy types—private food assistance (n=44), public food assistance (n=38), general and non-food social welfare/service (n=21), and social justice (n=14).

Administrators who claimed a bipartisan orientation spoke more often about engaging with a broader range of policy efforts than did administrators who reported an apolitical orientation. They also paid much greater attention to social welfare policies beyond food assistance alone. More than half of administrators at politicized food banks were engaged in social justice policies, such as living wages, demonstrating their emphasis on social change.

Table 5.1

Frequency of Policy Work by Food Banks' Political Orientations

Policy Type	Orientation: Apolitical (n=14)	Orientation: Bipartisan (n=10)	Orientation: Politicized (n=17)	Full Sample (N=62)
Any kind	93%	100%	100%	97%
Private food assistance	71%	100%	71%	71%
Public food assistance	50%	90%	76%	61%
Other social welfare	36%	70%	65%	34%
Social justice	7%	30%	53%	22%

Professional teams often carried out policy work. Most of the largest 100 food banks have advocacy pages on their websites that feature calls to action (Z. Smith, 2022). The National Feeding America Organization has an office in Washington, D.C. to facilitate national policy work, and many food banks have professional policy and advocacy staff. Many of the administrators discussed working with the National Feeding America Organization and state food bank associations to coordinate policy efforts at both the state and federal levels. Again, although some administrators claimed that their organizations were apolitical, they simultaneously described engagement in what are clearly political efforts to influence policy. For instance, Cynthia, CEO of a Feeding America food bank, talked about having an active policy department while also claiming that her organization was apolitical, demonstrating disconnect between her nonprofit's self-appraisal and its actions:

> We have a pretty active policy and advocacy department, and they keep their fingers on what's going on to impact us. And, of course, politics has a lot to do with what we do. We have to stay apolitical, but all we do is try to be that voice of those individuals who need that assistance and help to get legislators to understand the situations that they're in, towards doing community education on stigma, and people who are on SNAP or who are getting assistance are not lazy, they're not unemployed. Most people are working; they can't afford all this stuff. So it's just being that voice of those in need, our clients that we serve, and providing as much education and information so that our legislators can make informed decisions. But the politics is always there. We try to stay out of it. (Cynthia, 2021)

Cynthia’s discourse highlighted her food bank’s small-p politics through community education and Big-P Political actions through a dedicated policy department that engaged with policy issues and lobbied legislators. This paradoxical assertion of political neutrality alongside efforts at informal persuasion and formal policy work was common amongst food banks claiming political neutrality. Most of the administrators claimed a politically neutral, either apolitical or bipartisan, orientation while pursuing political influence. The difference between the food banks was apparent in how the type of political orientations each claimed corresponded with what kinds of policies and social changes, if any, they sought to achieve. In the sections that follow, I describe rare mentions of conservative policies that surfaced during the interviews, followed by detailed descriptions of the four main types of policies—private food assistance, public food assistance, other social welfare, and social justice (Table 5.1).

Conservative Policies. A substantial portion of the food bank administrators I interviewed supported maintaining the status quo of existing food assistance policies, but advocating for cutbacks to the social safety net and other conservative positions regarding social welfare programs were rare in my interviews. In cases where food bank administrators used conservative rhetoric, they were typically claiming that some people were taking advantage of the system or were criticizing people’s lack of self-sufficiency. Expressions that reflected conservative ideologies tended to coincide with organizations framing themselves as apolitical. For instance, Brandon, vice president at an independent food bank with an apolitical orientation, expressed a conservative view by characterizing his work as accepting the status quo and with it, social inequality, stating:

> How do contemporary politics affect our food bank? They don't. We're all poor, and we're all hungry, and we're all always going to be that way. And it doesn't matter what's going on around us. That's just a bad situation, right? (Brandon, 2022)

Brandon’s food bank did not engage in public policy work, but it expressed conservative ideologies through restrictive eligibility requirements in comparison to the other food banks I studied. He said that the enforcement of requirements was “fluid” (Brandon, 2022). However, the required documentation listed online was extensive, with multiple documents needed for every individual in the household. When asked about the decision-making behind these requirements, he claimed they were to prevent fraud and promote self-sufficiency (Brandon, 2022). He stated that his food bank used the documentation to help people reach a “sustainable life,” promoting ideas of self-sufficiency as the route to “ending hunger” (Brandon, 2022).

Dale’s food bank also framed itself as apolitical while advocating for and pursuing relatively conservative policies. He even critiqued the efficiency of the federal SNAP program, and he was one of only two administrators who did so. Just after he described how federal stimulus money lowered demand for food assistance, he claimed that his organization was more efficient than the federal government at delivering food resources:

> There's enough food for us to feed this whole country, and I believe we can feed this whole country for a lot less than what it's costing us to do the SNAP program. And I'm not anti-, but... I think it's our responsibility to feed the poor. So I think we can do that probably more efficiently and better than the government can and for a lot less money. (Dale, 2022)

Dale claimed that his food bank could feed people better and for less money than the government, but his food bank distributed government-funded TEFAP products. His food bank relied on federal commodity purchases made through TEFAP to subsidize his food bank’s food, which allowed it to reduce costs significantly. However, Dale’s position did not fit entirely within conservative policies. He criticized the mantra that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and he advocated for fewer eligibility requirements for TEFAP (Dale, 2022). His food bank also handed out paperwork to sign up for SNAP along with its food, indicating

how he still thought the program had enough value to engage in informal SNAP outreach (Dale, 2022).

Dale's claim that his food bank was more efficient than the government contrasted with many of the other administrators, who emphasized how important the SNAP program was to those in need, providing nearly ten times more resources than food banks collectively do while also providing more beneficiaries more choices. Ron, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a bipartisan orientation, critiqued the perspective that food banks can function without government support, stating:

> Honestly, to be really fair, food banks don't work without a public-private partnership. We just really don't. We were designed that way, and we just couldn't just take the place of the government altogether. (Ron, 2021)

Public and Private Food Assistance Policies. Most of the food bank administrators I interviewed (91%) described engaging in political advocacy to support local, state, and federal policies related to private and public food assistance programs. Since food assistance was central to food banks' advocacy, I differentiate private and public food assistance policies. Private food assistance policies are federal, state, and local policies that support food distribution by private, nonprofit organizations such as food banks, including TEFAP, which distributes federal commodities through food banks and other nonprofits. Private food assistance policies also include pressing governments to allocate more financial or food resources to food banks and loosening bureaucratic restrictions and requirements of existing public programs operated by food banks. I define public food assistance policies as federal, state, and local food assistance programs that are operated without nonprofit organizations serving as primary mediators or distributors of the program, such as SNAP and the national school meal programs.

Nearly three-quarters of the administrators described advocating for private food assistance policies that would supply financial and in-kind food resources to their food banks or change the administrative requirements for government-funded resources. Commonly discussed policies tied to private food assistance included federal commodity programs such as TEFAP and CSFP, which provide food to food banks and pandemic programs like the CARES Act, and the American Rescue Plan (ARPA), which directed funding to many food banks. Some administrators also discussed local- and state-level policies such as budgetary appropriations to food banks and disaster-response programs. Other private food assistance policies included those that incentivize or facilitate donations to food banks, an example of which is California's Senate Bill 1383, which requires organizations, including grocery stores, contracted food services, food distributors, wholesalers, restaurants, cafeterias, hotels, and hospitals, to donate edible food waste to organizations such as food banks (Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCP): Organic Waste Reductions, 2020). In addition to requesting more resources, the administrators also advocated for expanded eligibility requirements for programs such as TEFAP.

Ashley, manager at an independent food bank who did not share her food bank's political orientation, criticized other food banks' advocacy that focused on increasing food bank funding. She believed that donating to and supporting food banks in the long-term maintained the status quo and ultimately detracted from other, deeper solutions, stating:

> I think that the willingness of people to check their moral responsibility, check box with, "Oh, I donated to Feeding America, I am part of the solution." That absolved them, they're doing something about it. And I think that's incredibly dangerous because… it monopolize[s] the conversation and keep[s] us from talking about things that are real solutions. (Ashley, 2022)

Some administrators supported private food assistance policies and also advocated for expanding eligibility and resources for public food assistance programs. Most (61%) described

advocacy, by themselves or others at their organization, for public food assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, school lunch programs, and pandemic EBT. When administrators compared the effectiveness of private food banks to public programs in interviews, all, excepting two, emphasized that public assistance programs could do more for those in need than their food bank, or food banks in general, ever could. Several administrators cited Feeding America's talking point that SNAP provides nine times as many meals as the entire Feeding America network (Feeding America, 2020b), justifying advocacy of these policies as another way to help more people access food and lessen demand for their food banks' resources.

Social Welfare Policies. The United States relies heavily on in-kind food assistance as part of its social safety net, while other wealthy nations provide more cash assistance (Poppendieck, 2014b). However, 34% of interviewees pushed for social welfare policies beyond food assistance, describing advocacy for expanded social services, including Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid and other healthcare policies, affordable housing, childcare access, and pandemic-era stimulus payments. Although social welfare policies beyond food assistance came up in only one third of interviews, these policies were discussed by the majority of bipartisan (70%) and politicized (65%) food bank administrators. In comparison, only 36% of apolitical administrators did so, highlighting that different political framing used by nonprofit food banks links to distinctive forms of political action.

Lauren, a Feeding America CEO whose food bank was bipartisan and politicized, discussed that public policy work was an important part of her food bank's work, where they advocated for local, regional, and federal policies that would benefit them and those they served. She described much of their policy work as tied to the Farm Bill, SNAP, universal school meals,

and other policies that support food banks. She explained the rationale for supporting public food assistance policies, stating, “When you're giving access, that means that they're less likely to have to rely on a food bank or a charitable food organization for support” (Lauren, 2021). Lauren described how she would like to take on additional policies that address the root causes of hunger, but she said that her food bank was not yet taking on these issues because the board was uncomfortable with them.

Social Justice Policies. Some food bank administrators (16%) were beginning to expand their legislative agendas to advocate for systemic change, supporting policies that broadly benefit communities that are marginalized by poverty and race beyond food assistance and social welfare policies. Advocacy on social justice policies was described by just over half (53%) of politicized food banks, 30% of bipartisan food banks, and 7% of apolitical food banks. Administrators who framed their organizations as politically neutral (i.e., bipartisan or apolitical) were much less likely to advocate for social justice-oriented policies.

Social justice policies include a range of policies that address systemic inequities, supported alongside public and private food assistance and social welfare policies. The Food Bank for New York City’s website has a form to send letters easily to elected officials, advocating for several initiatives, including investment in private food assistance organizations, creating universal access to school food programs, and supporting policies to fight discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ and Hispanic communities (Food Bank for New York City, 2023; Z. Smith, 2022).

When focusing on systemic change, some food banks are turning to living wages. Inadequate wages came up in more than half of the interviews, with 26% discussing living wages, representing a powerful turn since much of food banks’ support historically comes from

agribusiness and grocery retailers who profit from low wages (Fisher, 2017a; Lohnes, 2023; Lohnes & Wilson, 2018). Five interviewees discussed starting wage-related advocacy by revising their employment practices to pay living wages. The food banks also encouraged increasing the wage base in their communities through public forums and promoting public policy initiatives. For instance, The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona sponsored a local ballot initiative for a $15 minimum wage in Tucson (Verwys, 2021).

Beyond focusing on wages, 16% of administrators reported that they were advocating for social justice policies that affected people in poverty and the food system broadly, such as the right to food, decriminalizing drug possession, police accountability, changing land use policies in support of urban farming and gardening, Black maternal health, and promoting access to childcare. Administrators who supported social justice policies connected their political engagement with broader efforts to build political power and generate policy solutions.

Big-P Politics: Building Political Power and Voting Initiatives

Beyond their work on specific causes and policies, food bank administrators discussed new efforts to build political power through community organizing and voter mobilization. Although relatively rare among food banks, such efforts were more common at food banks with a politicized orientation. Four administrators described their efforts to promote voting and voter registration, and all four led politicized food banks, while one claimed also to be bipartisan. These administrators described their efforts at building political power through a mobilized voter base as part of a broader effort to engage the populations they served.

Kim, CEO of a Feeding America food bank, described her food bank as taking a politicized orientation. She shared that supporting policies that improved childcare and library access was part of their work to address the root causes of hunger (Kim, 2021). These initiatives

came from the community organizing that the food bank was doing in addition to its standard role as food distributor. Kim detailed how the food bank is involved in grassroots advocacy that seeks to influence elected officials without engaging in forbidden partisan activities, such as supporting political parties or candidates. After describing the food bank's distribution of food in-kind, she said:

> Then, we have the side of our work in which we are working on the root causes of hunger. And we do that through community food systems, which is really community organizing around how well the food systems are working or not working in a community and engaging people for community action that doesn't require any regulatory or systems change at an elected level. And through organizing and advocacy and civic engagement to impact elected officials. (Kim, 2021)

Kim further described how food distribution is intertwined and part of a strategy to build political power and create systemic change to end hunger.

> To end hunger, we have to pull down those barriers. Those barriers are primarily systemic, and they have to be pulled down at the policy or regulatory level, and so, in order to pull those barriers down, you need political power. (Kim, 2021)

Kim then described how her food bank viewed itself as building political power by organizing people through the food assistance system (Kim, 2021). Through political organizing and advocacy, the food bank outlined its role as a site of political action, taking on issues that extended beyond food assistance policy to end hunger. Building political power through food assistance is found in Spanish food banks with horizontal governance structures (Gómez Garrido et al., 2019).

Other food banks were also involved in building political power and helping people exercise their voting rights by registering people to vote and becoming polling stations. Some supported environmental and social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter and food justice organizing regarding the right to food.

Influences on Political Orientations and Actions

Food bank administrators' simultaneous framing of their organizations as politically neutral while being involved in informal and formal political work raises important questions about why food banks present themselves in this way. In some cases, this paradoxical framing arose from administrators' failure to recognize their political lobbying and educational campaigns that reinforced the status quo as political action. In other cases, administrators framed their organizations as politically neutral despite being politically active to maintain legitimacy with boards and donors. When administrators consciously engaged in political actions, they leveraged their missions to legitimize these actions. Politicized food banks particularly leaned on their missions of ending hunger and poverty, which provided a broad moral imperative for changing the status quo, and thus a politicized orientation. In essence, they leveraged their missions to justify their political orientations. Even CEOs and executive directors who could tie their politicized orientations to missions did not have complete control over their organizations. They had to experience and navigate external pressures from boards and donors. Food banks experienced opposition most frequently when they deviated from the historical role that food banks have played, particularly as they pushed for social justice policies that sought to create systemic change. Fear of opposition that could lead to funding losses was a deterrent for administrators, preventing them from acting on what they believed was necessary to end hunger. Administrators' fears of retribution for taking a political stance were identified by Lohnes (2023) in an institutional ethnography based in West Virginia food pantries and food banks. I found that for food banks to overcome these fears, they had to recognize the moral necessity of political action and the potential to locate new sources of funding from people and organizations who found fault with maintaining the status quo.

Mission Fulfillment or Mission Drift?

Food banks' framing of their political orientations often resulted in them drawing on their organizations' mission and vision statements, thus highlighting the importance of how food banks framed such value statements. Mission statements signaled their organizations' approach to donors and the public. Food banks with traditional charity missions that focused on feeding people (see Chapter 2) more commonly took narrower approaches to political advocacy, which often coincided with an apolitical or bipartisan orientation to food banking.

Nathan, an executive director with a long history of working in private food assistance, discussed how donors push food banks to address the root causes of hunger, changing their programming to do more than provide in-kind food. However, he critiqued their lack of awareness that this would mean ending poverty, a highly contentious issue. Nathan framed his organization as apolitical but was politically involved as an individual, stating:

> You can't remove the need for food assistance without ending poverty, and ending poverty, interestingly enough, has a lot of political and public policy entailments that the people who want to look at root causes don't necessarily have an eagerness to engage with. I'm also [a member of the] Democratic Party. And I say, "If you wanna have a meeting about ending poverty, we have meetings once a month; you're welcome to come down and help us work on that." (Nathan, 2021)

He framed addressing poverty as a partisan political issue that lies outside the scope of food banking, despite his own active partisan efforts. This highlights a contradiction between what he views as the role of food banks and the way to end hunger, demonstrating that he views food banks as a way to meet immediate needs rather than as a viable solution to end hunger.

On the other hand, Tracy, vice president at a Feeding America food bank with a politicized orientation, used her food bank's mission of ending hunger as motivation to pursue politicized work alongside its commitment to meeting immediate needs, stating:

> As a food bank, we have a responsibility to provide the best food that we have to people in need in an equitable way, and making sure that at the same time, we are really working to solve hunger, cause that's what we say our mission is. (Tracy, 2021)

She said ending hunger occurs through policy work (Tracy, 2021). Throughout the interview, Tracy detailed her food bank's involvement in private and public food assistance, other social welfare, and social justice policies (Tracy, 2021).

Board Influence

When taking on issues that deviate from upholding the status quo of advocating for food assistance policies, the administrators discussed the need for board approval. The administrators negotiated with their organizations' board of directors to take political positions, such as advocating for living wages. This process follows typical nonprofit governance structures. Food banks are typically structured hierarchically, with an executive director or CEO in the highest-paid position whom an external board of directors oversees. Board oversight has important implications regarding who has the power to shape food bank political orientations and actions. Extant research has found that food bank board members often come from the corporate sector, and they push for political positions, policies, and programs that support the exploitative, capitalist food system (Fisher, 2017a). Corporations, political elites, and wealthy donors have tremendous influence over food banks as both board members and donors.

Lauren, whose food bank's food assistance advocacy was detailed above, described her board as the limiting factor that prevents political advocacy on broader social safety net and social justice policies:

> There is a lot of conversation around the appropriateness of us to get engaged in healthcare platforms or living wage, or income gap type of work, housing, peer housing…. The food stuff and obviously programming like SSI that directly benefits the individuals that we're serving are no-brainers. The other stuff is things that we are slowly

> trying to gain comfortability and traction within our board so we can participate. (Lauren, 2021)

The administrators described the need for board support for their programs, but especially for proposals that lie outside the mainstream, such as living wage initiatives. Obtaining board support is complicated by food bank boards' domination by corporate food system members (Fisher, 2017a). Most administrators who took on these politically charged issues described approaching their work from a perspective of abundance. This perspective of abundance was an outlook of food bank administrators and board members that characterized donors and potential donations as an abundant resource. Administrators who take this perspective believed that new directions for food banking might lose some former supporters but would also open up new funding sources. The administrators juxtaposed this perspective of abundance with a scarcity mentality—an outlook that assumes resources are scarce and any loss of support results in the food bank having fewer resources—which has historically dominated food banking (Bouek, 2018a).

When Justin, a Feeding America food bank CEO, brought up the need to push for a living wage and the possibility of donors ceasing support, he said that his board supported him by taking this perspective of abundance, saying to "find new donors" if existing donors retaliated (Justin, 2021). Following this decision to pursue living wages, his food bank's annual revenue continued a general growth trend through the interview date.

Justin's board's view that there were plenty of donors differed from the scarcity view articulated by so many other administrators. This view was conducive to his food bank taking a more political stance on hunger, poverty, and food distribution. This willingness to engage politically was also reflected in Andrea's food bank, which took a politicized approach

advocating for social justice and also pushed back on donor metric requirements, as detailed in Chapter 4 (Andrea, 2022). Taking up issues of poverty, hunger, and racism and their systemic causes—issues that could alienate prospective donors—required that the food banks have supportive boards that are confident that they can attract other donors.

Kim, whose food bank was mentioned earlier as engaging in extensive political organizing, described how her food bank is shifting decision-making for their policy agenda from the board of directors to a group of people who are BIPOC and have lived experiences of hunger from across their service area (Kim, 2021). Kim stated, “They haven't clashed yet, so there will be a clash, and that's going to be when it's interesting” (Kim, 2021). When I asked her for more about this issue, she added:

> The [new group] will say [our food bank] should take a position on this controversial thing that will make Republicans mad at us. And then the board will be like, “Wait, do we want Republicans mad at us?”… That's what I think is going to happen. (Kim, 2021)

Kim anticipated future tensions when the board worries about alienating Republicans as the food bank incorporates more people who have experienced hunger directly in their policy deliberations and decision-making. Although this conflict has not yet happened, Kim is still anticipating opposition over the fear of losing donors and how to navigate the tensions.

The Costs of Advocacy

Such fears were not unfounded, since taking a political position could come with a cost. In 2021, the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona contributed $50,000 to support a local proposition to raise the city of Tucson’s minimum wage to $15 and subsequently tie the minimum wage to inflation (N. Ludden, 2021; Verwys, 2021). The proposition passed, representing substantial gains for low-wage workers (N. Ludden, 2021). In response to the

contribution, the food bank lost funding from a local government outside the Tucson-based proposition's jurisdiction. The city of Sahuarita rescinded a contract with the food back after paying only half the amount (Verwys, 2021). The town manager of Sahuarita claimed the rescinded contract was due to the food bank choosing to make a political contribution and not based on the food bank supporting an increased minimum wage (Verwys, 2021). However, the food bank had previously been involved in political advocacy (Verwys, 2021). The $9,000 balance was a small amount for the food bank, which had over $125 million in revenue in 2022.

Still, the prospect of losing funding can be intimidating for nonprofit food banks whose livelihoods depend on donations and outside funding. This fear is heightened among smaller food banks in which budgets are tight. This case demonstrates that funders work to control recipient activities beyond the scope of their contracts, since Sahuarita said that future contracts will likely restrict nonprofits from making political contributions (Verwys, 2021). The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona case illustrates the political tensions that food banks must navigate, especially when they engage with charged issues such as ending poverty and hunger. Since Sahuarita is a public entity, the case was subject to public reporting and news coverage, and yet much food bank support is through private donors and sources, obscuring those interactions. Private donors can change their contributions without the same degree of public scrutiny, and thus how food banks cater to donors' demands is rarely seen.

Donor Appeals

In interviews, food bank administrators discussed how their organizations' alignment with political orientations influenced the donations they received, reporting that donors wanted to support organizations that aligned with their political beliefs. According to the administrators,

this is especially true in today's highly polarized political climate. Rather than trying to create bipartisan appeal, some drew from the partisan associations of their nonprofit organizations. George, director of an independent food bank at a Community Action Agency, described how the community viewed his organization as “the government food bank,” despite being a private charity (George, 2021). This contrasted with the local Feeding America food bank, which he said is viewed as a religious food bank or the “republican food bank” due to its historical religious associations and founding by a Republican Party member (George, 2021).

The administrators also made political decisions based on fear of losing donors. The depoliticization of hunger was a strategy to minimize conflict, since they viewed themselves as vying for scarce resources. This was evidenced by Charles’s approach to handling the letters from Trump and Greg’s previously mentioned fear of getting involved in “touchy” subjects. Greg spoke about how political polarization influences the narratives that his food bank uses to attract donors. He admitted his food bank's difficulties with maintaining an apolitical orientation as they tried to solicit donors from across the political spectrum.

> A lot of those things have really ramped up the partisan nature, which really creates a challenge for our messaging. What moves people across the political spectrum to donate to something like a food bank? It's not a standard issue…, their motivations are different. And so, because of the partisan nature, it becomes harder to message to a broad population. You end up starting to target message, and now you've got yourself in dangerous waters. (Greg, 2021)

Greg spoke of how his food bank tried to remain politically neutral while obtaining donations. However, he said political polarization is making that more complicated than it used to be. Even their attempts to be politically neutral upset potential donors.

Sharon, CEO of a Feeding America food bank with a politicized orientation, spoke of how her food bank realized that they had already been deterring donors with their messaging.

Her food bank's former apolitical orientation that furthered the traditional charity model work did not resonate with the liberal-leaning population of her region. Taking a politicized orientation, she said, "We are acting on the belief that regardless of the community in which we are doing this work, we will find the people for whom this approach resonates, and they'll step forward and invest in our mission" (Sharon, 2021). She thus highlighted that traditional food banking is not politically neutral and that the food bank's mission of ending hunger legitimates a politicized orientation. This recognition of the political nature of traditional food banking as supporting the status quo enabled administrators to take a politicized orientation that pushed for social change and social justice.

Conclusion

As food banks increasingly take on the directive of ending hunger, evidenced by the mission statements of more than half of the organizations I interviewed, their work becomes more contentious in an increasingly polarized political climate. The administrators positioned their organizations across a spectrum of political orientations, declaring themselves anywhere from being politically neutral to building grassroots political capacity and funding social justice ballot initiatives. The framing of their political engagement provides insights into how they understand their work and what they see as socially and politically viable. As some food banks expand their commitment to social justice principles and movements, they must break away from their industry's prior commitment to status quo social and political relations.

The common industry perception that food banks and food banking are politically neutral is a misnomer. All of the administrators I interviewed described their active political engagement, with most participating in formal political action. Instead, claims of political

neutrality associated with food banks seeking to maintain their donor base and, with it, the status quo. In contrast, food banks that admitted their politicization pushed for systemic social change. The characterization of food banks as politically neutral obscures their role in helping to maintain the status quo as they redistribute corporate excesses and contribute to the narrative that existing policies and approaches are sufficient. Such framing also masks the political power of food banks as they advocate for social change, wherein considerable food bank resources and political capital are used to advocate for reforming food assistance and social welfare policies.

Administrators' political framing and actions were also influenced by board members and donors, demonstrating that economic elites influence the work of food banks heavily. Understanding this additional mechanism of elite influence is important because food banks implicitly hold considerable political power. The food bank industry has considerable influence through its media sway, network of more than 60,000 partner organizations, and professionalized network of government relations experts and lobbyists. The industry regularly interfaces with elected government officials and has relationships with millions of clients, donors, and volunteers. Their power could be used to support the status quo, as it has until recently, or advocate for systemic changes, as a few food banks have chosen to pursue.

The uptake of systemic and justice-focused approaches in food banking represents a significant development as food banks push for equitable distribution of resources and food system practices with less environmental and labor exploitation. As a multi-billion-dollar industry that has become institutionalized in U.S. anti-hunger efforts, food banks' incorporation of food justice principles could create a powerful new group that is organizing for food justice and ending poverty (Lohnes, 2023). However, food banks must also navigate the tensions of their roots as redistributors of excess food that supports the current inequitable food system.

Administrators must consider the political implications of their actions, recognizing that continuing on the existing path is still a political act that supports the status quo. Food banks have considerable influence over policy and public opinion regarding the appropriate way to address poverty in the United States, and yet administrators do not make these decisions on their own. Food bank decision-making is influenced heavily by their dependence on donors and government support. Administrators based their political orientations in narratives that tended to legitimize their work as a nonprofit organization. They defended attempts to remain neutral based on their role as nonprofits and public perceptions of what this means. In contrast, when they spoke about taking politicized orientations, they tended to tie political participation to their missions to end hunger, poverty, and inequity. These food banks decided to take risks with these new ventures, hoping to find further support while being grounded in the moral imperative that they could not continue to support the status quo of inequality in the U.S.

This chapter explores how food banks discuss and engage in politics. Great variation in their political orientations and efforts leads to uneven support. Food banks offer a localized solution, and depending on where someone who is experiencing hunger and poverty lives, their food bank might do more or less to support their interests. In the next chapter, I explore another dimension of this unevenness by examining the resource distribution of food banks. I trace patterns in food bank resources and geographical resource allocation to assess the implications of relying on food banks as a localized solution to hunger.

Chapter 6. Spatial Differences in Food Bank Resources

Abbreviations

ACS: American Community Survey

AIC: Akaike Information Criterion

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

EIN: Employer Identification Number

FDPIR: Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

IRS: Internal Revenue Service

PDO: Feeding America Partner Distribution Organization

RDO: Feeding America Redistribution Organization

SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

TEFAP: The Emergency Food Assistance Program

TSFCA: Two-Step Floating Catchment Area

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

In previous chapters, I assessed how U.S. food banks differ in terms of their approaches to addressing hunger by exploring alignment among missions, programs, metrics, and political work within the traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change models. During interviews, food bank administrators sometimes referred to their organization's capacity to take on certain approaches. These descriptive references of how resources guide approaches to food banking cannot capture fully the great variation in the scales of food bank resources. Thus, in this chapter I explore patterns in food bank resource distribution to better understand variations in the private food assistance safety net and who has access to its resources.

Organizational variations in both approaches and resources are characteristic qualities of the U.S. privatized social safety net, in comparison to the public social safety net. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, food banks have similarities in programming, but the types of food bank programs that those who are experiencing food insecurity have access to largely depends on their local food bank(s). Publicly funded and administered social safety net programs like SNAP have some variation in program administration and resources across states (Wilkerson et al., 2018). However, programs implemented at the federal level are generally available across the United States. For example, SNAP is available across the 50 states, Washington, D.C., Guam, and the Virgin Islands (CBPP, 2022).[31] SNAP is also funded federally, so people have access to the same amount of resources, rather than depending on local funding (CBPP, 2022). In contrast, privatized food assistance programs localize responsibility for providing social services, placing the greatest burden to raise resources on communities that are already the most disadvantaged (Strong, 2020).

Feeding America operates a national network of food banks that serves every county in America.[32] However, as private organizations, food banks must raise their own resources by submitting grant applications, obtaining government contracts, soliciting donations, and sometimes engaging in profit-driven ventures. This leads to local food banks having variable levels of resources available to them. The National Feeding America Organization tried to enforce standardized amounts of food assistance relative to need in each county with their MPIN

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[31] SNAP is still not distributed equitably geographically. It is unavailable in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CBPP, 2022). People who participate in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are also ineligible for SNAP (Pindus & Hafford, 2019). FDPIR provides in-kind food, making it more similar to TEFAP than SNAP.
[32] In web searchers, I did find counties without any partner agencies.

metric, but due to discrepancies changed requirements for these metrics to depend on an individual food bank's resources rather than setting a national or regional standard (see Chapter 4).

Extant research on spatial patterns of nonprofit resource distribution in the United States points to geographic inequities by race, urbanicity, and poverty (Allard, 2009; Bacon & Baker, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; Waity, 2016). However, such research is limited in that it commonly focuses on smaller geographies, examining a few counties or cities while assessing only some of the variables and their interactions. I contribute to this field by incorporating organizational financial data to better account for resource availability and by including all of three variables of race, urbanicity, and poverty together in a single study.

In the current context, the government is increasingly relying on food banks to operate as extensions of the state and administer federal programs. This chapter specifically explores the spatial distribution of food assistance resources, addressing how food bank resources are distributed geospatially. I use a novel dataset that comprises a census of food banks in select states, which I analyze with IRS and U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) 2018-2022 5-year estimates on demographics. I draw from qualitative interviews conducted among food bank administrators to support the analysis and further assess how food banks are distributing resources in service areas of varying sizes. These findings have important implications regarding how relying on food banks to administer the U.S. social safety net exacerbates some existing inequities in food access.

Spatial Mismatch or Spatial Equity

Several studies have found conflicting results when examining how private food assistance is related spatially to demographic characteristics, such as urbanicity, poverty, and race. Molnar et al.'s (2001) study of the East Alabama Food Bank and 12 of its partner agencies found rural-urban disparities in the agencies. In a study of service-based social assistance in three cities, Allard (2009) found that assistance is less prevalent in high-poverty areas. However, studies conducted in Indiana (Waity, 2016) and Santa Clara County, CA (Bacon & Baker, 2017) that measured urbanicity and poverty found an interaction in which densely populate, high-poverty areas are the best served by food assistance organizations while less-densely populated, high-poverty areas are the least served. Since Allard studied only Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Chicago, his findings that high-poverty areas in urban areas are least served contradicts Waity's (2016) and Bacon and Baker's (2017) findings that high-poverty urban areas are served best when considering areas of varying poverty and urbanicity. However, Allard (2009) is the only researcher to include racial demographics as a variable, finding racial inequities, with predominately Black and Hispanic areas having less assistance than predominately white areas. According to recent studies, demographics play a role in the prevalence of and access to private food assistance. However, it is still unclear how poverty, race, and urbanity specifically affect access. None of the studies conducted so far have accounted for these factors and their interactions together in a single study.

Differences in access to food assistance resources in relation to poverty demographics align with two contemporary theories social service resource distribution—community responsiveness and spatial mismatch (Allard, 2009; Waity, 2016). Community responsiveness suggests that food assistance resources are responsive to community needs, a theory that further

suggests that localized food assistance programs are able to respond to local needs. It also aligns with “Hooverism” by suggesting that communities respond to local needs. Kelly and Lobao (2021) found that U.S. county governments were responsive to community needs in providing social services, but only in response to greater poverty among Whites. From these findings, the theory of community responsiveness can be tied to the hypothesis that U.S. counties with the greatest rates of poverty will have greater access to food bank resources than counties with less poverty (Waity, 2016).

By contrast, spatial mismatch theory suggests that nonprofit and food assistance resources are usually located far from those in need, and that systemic inequities lead to inequitable spatial access to needed resources (Allard, 2009, 2017; Waity, 2016). Lohnes and Wilson (2018), for instance, found that wealthier counties in West Virginia invested more money and volunteered more time in the private food assistance network, regardless of their food insecurity rates, while counties with very high food insecurity had fewer organizations that provided food assistance. Kelly and Lobao (2021) found that U.S. county-based public social services were locally responsive to White poverty, but that greater Black poverty associated negatively with social service provision.

A spatial mismatch hypothesis suggests that access to food bank resources associates negatively with the percentage of the population near poverty, since those who need resources are located in poorer communities that cannot provide resources to local nonprofits. Such research thus suggests the need to control for both urbanicity and race regarding access to food bank resources. Privatizing social service provision has historically been tied to racial biases and broader structural inequities (Clemens, 2017; Ray et al., 2023). The infrastructure of the food banking industry largely grew out of the for-profit food industry’s excesses in cities (Deener,

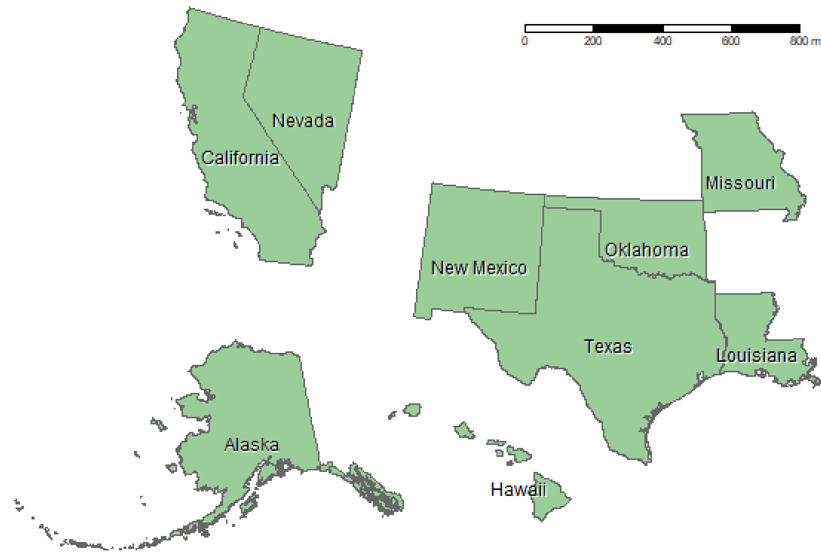
2020). Similar to development of the supermarket system, the food banking industry developed in response to available infrastructures (Deener, 2020). However, this history led food banks to be dispersed unequally, with greater concentrations in urban areas. Warshawsky (2023) argues that the food bank model assumes the infrastructure of an urban or suburban food system, running into barriers as people try to translate it to rural areas. In addition to testing hypotheses on community responsiveness and spatial mismatch, I also examined whether race and urbanicity mediate the barriers these former studies identified and, furthermore, whether race and urbanicity are associated access to food bank resources.

Geospatial Methods Overview

I provide an overview of the geospatial methods and variable choices I used during analysis, and I provide a more detailed explanation of methodological processes and decisions in the Methodological Appendix. I use these methods to show patterns in food bank accessibility and resources. I constructed an original census of food banks across nine states—Alaska, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Missouri, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Texas (Figure 6.1). These states comprise 27% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), though they were not selected randomly and therefore are not generalizable to the entire country. I thus do not attempt to generalize findings outside of these nine states. Instead, I describe access to food bank resources for the more than a quarter of the U.S. population that lives in these states.

Figure 6.1

States in Food Bank Census



Note. Alaska and Hawaii have been moved, and their scales have been adjusted using the "shift_geometry()" function in the tigris package.

Near Poverty

I use a measure of the percentage of the population whose annual income is near the poverty line (within 185%) to approximate the percentage of the population that is more likely to experience food insecurity. I use county-level data from 5-year estimates of the American Community Survey (ACS), from 2018 to 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). USDA data on food insecurity is unavailable at the county level, so I use household income data, which associates strongly with food insecurity (Rabbitt et al., 2023). I use data at 185% of the poverty line instead of the poverty line itself because only 28% of food-insecure households are in poverty, according to the official U.S. measure of poverty (Rabbitt et al., 2023). The official poverty measure is known to be insufficient at estimating experiences of material hardship (e.g., food insecurity)

that relate conceptually with poverty (Desmond, 2023; Heflin et al., 2009; Iceland, 2013; Rank, 2023). I use a ratio of households that have income within 185% of the official poverty measure since USDA data suggest that 32% of households that fall under this income threshold are food insecure. This is nearly as high as the 36.7% of households that live under the poverty line who are also food insecure (Rabbitt et al., 2023).

I also use a measure based on a ratio of the official poverty measure, since this is commonly used as a determinant of eligibility for public and private food assistance. SNAP eligibility is based on 130% of the poverty line (Wilkerson et al., 2018), but the food bank administrators emphasized the role they play in serving food-insecure people who are ineligible for SNAP. TEFAP eligibility varies by state, but 185% is the most common threshold used by the nine states in the Food Bank Census (Feeding America, 2020a).

Race

To measure racial demographics, I used county-level 2018–2022 ACS estimates. I calculated a variable that is the percentage of a county's population that is BIPOC, which includes Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The percent BIPOC for a county includes ACS estimates for the percentage of the population that identifies as Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders, some other race, or more than one race. I tried estimating models with a more detailed breakdown of racial demographics (i.e., one that included percent White, percent Hispanic or Latino, percent Black, percent Asian and Pacific Islander, and percent some other race or multiple races), but the best-fitting model by AIC included the percentage of the population that is BIPOC in a county indicating that perhaps data from more states is needed to examine nuances between racial groups.

Urbanicity and Rurality

To measure urbanicity and rurality, I adapted the USDA's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. I divided the codes into a binary variable that groups urban counties into a group coded "1" and rural counties into a group coded "0." I recoded the variable because I found a non-linear relationship between spatial accessibility and the nine-category rural-urban continuum codes that reflected an association with adjacency to urban areas, which was already accounted for in the accessibility measure and models. I refer to this measure as urbanicity.

Quintiles

To report descriptive statistics on food bank resources in relation to types of counties, I grouped 653 counties in the nine states into quintiles based on the percentage of the population that was experiencing near poverty and the percentage that was BIPOC. Quintiles divide the counties into five even groups based on either the percent of the population near poverty or the percent of the population that is BIPOC, such that 20% of counties fall into each group.

Food Bank Resources

I constructed a food bank census by including all food banks that serve the nine selected states. To be included in the food bank census as a food bank, an organization had to be a private, nonprofit organization that redistributes food intended for human consumption to at least one partner agency in one of the selected states. I considered food bank resources on two levels. The first is organizational resources, represented as the number of food banks in a geographic area, and the second is the food bank's financial resources, calculated based on IRS tax documents, which assign a monetary value to in-kind goods. Thus, food bank revenue represents how much cash and in-kind resources a food bank sourced in a year (Costanzo, 2020d).

I use a buffer to determine all food banks, and their associated revenue, within 100 miles of a county's centroid. I used 100 miles because it represents approximately a two-hour drive each way by truck, which would account for about half a work day for food to be picked up by a partner agency. Ninety-one percent of counties in the food bank census had at least one food bank within 100 miles, but 58 counties did not. Many of the food banks that were interviewed delivered some food throughout their service areas, but some administrators reported that they allowed local agencies to pick up food more frequently. The average service area of Feeding America Member food banks throughout the U.S. includes 16 counties. The administrators also reported that they had better-developed networks in proximate areas, and thus I consider proximity to be a dimension of accessibility. Measuring all food bank revenue within a 100-mile buffer provides insights into the availability of nearby resources that can cross county lines. I use revenue within a 100-mile buffer for descriptive statistics (as opposed to two-step floating catchment areas) because it is a measure with identifiable and relatable units. This measurement of food assistance organizations within a radius also corresponds with extant research on food pantry availability (Bacon & Baker, 2017; Waity, 2016), though I use a much larger radius to account for food banks serving organizations instead of food pantries serving clients. I include a measure of food banks' annual revenue to account for scale.

Food Bank Accessibility Using a Two-Step Floating Catchment Area (TSFCA)

To measure food bank accessibility in my regression analysis, I used a two-step floating catchment area (TSFCA) to determine the spatial accessibility of resources. TSFCA was developed by Luo and Wang (2003) to estimate spatial accessibility of healthcare in a way that accounts for the sites and resources available within a given distance, and demand for each site based on nearby populations. The measure has been used recently in sociological research on the

spatial accessibility of healthcare and legal service nonprofit organizations (Roubenoff et al., 2023). The measure accounts for the supply of resources based on annual revenues at each food bank within 100 miles of a county, while also accounting for concurrent demands presented by the population size of all counties within 100 miles of each food bank. By weighting accessibility based on demand from the total population, TSFCA incorporates its own control for spatial differences in nearby population sizes. It thus provides insights into the relative amount of food bank resources proximate to a county in relation to other demands placed on those food banks. TSFCA produces a unitless accessibility score, which can be interpreted in relation to other scores produced from the same analysis, where higher scores indicate greater access to food bank resources.

Descriptive Statistics on How Food Bank Resources are Distributed

To examine how food bank resources are distributed across food banks, I use the food bank census, IRS data, and data from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Appendix for details on methods). The food bank census refers to the 143 food banks with a total of 163 locations included in the nine-state food bank census.[33] This group is distinct from the food banks in my interview sample, though some food banks were represented in both. My interview sample included some other organizations, but the census included only food banks. My interview sample also included organizations outside of the selected nine states. By analyzing this data quantitatively and spatially, I contribute new descriptive information on a range of food banks,

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[33] Descriptive statistics are based on the most recently available data, with missing values removed.

including independent and smaller food banks.[34] I also examine trends regarding how food bank resources relate to geographic inequities.

Descriptive Statistics from the Food Bank Census

In the Food Bank Census, the median annual revenue reported to the IRS was $13.8 million, which skewed with a mean of $39 million due to several larger organizations with higher revenues (Table 6.1).[35] The food banks in the census had a total of $5.46 billion in annual revenue, which varied greatly across organizations, ranging from $21,700 at California's Amador Tuolumne Community Action Agency to $376,356,914 at Houston Food Bank. Most food banks had only one location (n=124, 86.7%), but some, besides Midwest Food Bank and Feed the Children, had two (n=15), three (n=1), or four (n=1).

To account for the distribution of resources across multiple locations, I calculated revenues weighted by the number of locations, which were used in spatial accessibility measures for food banks with multiple locations and for imputing missing data. The median weighted revenue was $13.5 million, and the mean weighted revenue was $31.5 million. The highest weighted revenue was at Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, which had $256 million at a single location. Food banks also reported the value of their assets to the IRS. The median value of assets was $10.2 million, and the mean was $24.4 million. Food banks' assets also varied,

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[34] Other food bank lists tend to include only those in the Feeding America Network, as found in research from the National Feeding America Organization, or they focus on larger food banks (Costanzo, 2021b).
[35] I adjusted revenue and number of partner agencies for these calculations for Midwest Food Bank and Feed the Children because these are each national food banks that operate in multiple locations (e.g., Midwest Food Bank has 12 locations and Feed the Children has 5) under a single EIN for all locations (Costanzo, 2020d). Midwest Food Bank has annual revenue of $435 million and Feed the Children has $388 million, making these the largest food banks by revenue. Therefore, I adjusted their revenues and number of partner agencies by dividing by the number of locations an organization has. However, Midwest Food Bank of Texas reported having 100 partners at that location, so I used that number for them. I did not adjust assets for these organizations.

ranging from two food banks with $0 (at Food for Families - Bullhead City Food Bank and Shasta Senior Nutrition Program/Dignity Health Connected Living) to $253 million at Second Harvest of Silicon Valley.

To assess the scale of food bank operations, I used the number of partner agencies to which a food bank distributed. The median food bank had 100 partner agencies, and food banks, on average, had 176 partner agencies. In total, food banks in the food bank census worked with 24,861 partner agencies, though there is likely some overlap because some partner agencies work with multiple food banks. These also varied greatly, ranging from three food banks with one partner agency each (Food for Life of New Orleans, Our Neighbors Cupboard Food Bank, and Elk Grove Food Bank Services) to Food Forward (based in North Hollywood, CA) with 1,800 partner agencies. It is helpful to think of food banks regarding their role as resource providers that connect partner agencies to resources. By examining the revenue each food bank had in relation to its number of partner agencies, I found that the median food bank had $179,000 in annual revenue per partner agency, and the average food bank had $348,000 per partner agency.

The food bank census included food banks that are part of the Feeding America Network and independent food banks. The most extensive, current national list of independent food banks includes 74 independent food banks of the top 300 (24.7%) (Costanzo, 2023c). The nine-state food bank census found additional independent food banks that were not included on existing lists. I found 59 independent food banks, which accounted for 41.3% of all food banks (Table 6.1), and the remaining 84 food banks (58.7%) were affiliated with Feeding America as either Feeding America food banks (n=55), Feeding America PDO food banks (n=28), or Feeding America RDO food banks (n=1). Most (58%) also affiliated with a state or regional food bank association, many of which allowed food banks only from the Feeding America Network. The

California Association of Food Banks had the largest number of members (n=42), seven of which were also members of the Bay Area Food Banks group. Feeding Texas had 21 member food banks, followed by Feeding Missouri's six members, Feeding Louisiana's five, the New Mexico Association of Food Bank's five, and the Alaska Food Coalition's four.[36]

In addition to connections to private associations, many food banks were also connected to the USDA. The food bank census showed that most food banks were involved in administering the public social safety net, since 70% of food banks (n=100) were TEFAP distributors. The food bank census included food banks that served a nine-state area, which included food banks located in eleven states, since some served across state borders. The food bank census shows that states had the following number of food banks located within their borders: California (n=68), Texas (n=30), Louisiana (n=10), New Mexico (n=8), Missouri (n=7), Oklahoma(n=6), Alaska (n=5), Hawaii (n=4), and Nevada (n=3). Arizona had a small food bank that served border towns in Nevada and California, and one Arkansas food bank served a Texas county. [37]

These figures demonstrate the large scope of U.S. food banking operations as a multi-billion-dollar industry. They also point to the heterogeneity of food banks in terms of their financial resources, service to partner agencies, connections to food bank associations, and work with the government. This large variation suggests the importance of studying multiple types of food banks and how their resources are distributed spatially.

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[36] The Alaska Food Coalition is operated by the Food Bank of Alaska.
[37] Harvesters–The Community Food Network had locations in both Missouri and Kansas, with headquarters in Missouri, so I treat them as a Missouri food bank in state summaries.

Table 6.1

Food Bank Census Characteristics by Food Bank Type

	Annual Revenue		Partner Agencies		Revenue per Partner Agency	TEFAP	Full Sample	
Variable	Mean	Total	Mean	Total	Mean	%	n	%
Independent	$15,019,388	$841,085,705	143	8,166	$397,030	32.2%	59	41.3%
Feeding America Network	$55,011,498	$4,620,965,842	199	16,695	$317,247	96.4%	84	58.7%
Member	$76,249,354	$4,193,714,470	270	14,844	$338,365	96.4%	55	38.5%
PDO	$15,242,162	$426,780,523	64.3	1,801	$286,759	100%	28	19.6%
RDO	$470,849	$470,849	50	50	$9,417	0.0%	1	0.7%
State								
Alaska	$6,410,434	$32,052,168	80.5	322	$76,288	100%	5	3.5%
California	$37,478,436	$2,473,576,748	168	11,259	$419,271	64.7%	68	47.6%
Hawaii	$17,186,827	$68,747,307	130	519	$103,884	75.0%	4	2.8%
Louisiana	$21,257,168	$212,571,679	113	1,132	$383,619	60.0%	10	7.0%
Missouri	$60,230,419	$421,612,934	314	2,196	$212,644	85.7%	7	4.9%
Nevada	$62,545,069	$125,090,138	304	912	$396,343	100%	3	2.1%
New Mexico	$20,029,512	$160,236,094	102	815	$116,196	62.5%	8	5.6%
Oklahoma	$44,282,425	$265,694,550	319	1,915	$274,667	33.3%	6	4.2%
Texas	$56,429,153	$1,692,874,597	189	5,661	$377,448	80.0%	30	21.0%
Other	$4,797,666	$9,595,332	65	130	$48,328	100%	2	1.4%
Total	**$ 39,014,654**	**$5,462,051,547**	**176**	**24,861**	**$348,466**	**69.9%**	**143**	**100%**
	n=140	n=140	n=141	n=141	n=138	n=143	N=143	

Note. Descriptive statistics for each category. States refer to the state in which a food bank is located physically, not the state(s) it serves. The following sub-categories had food banks with missing revenue data: Independent food banks (n=3), California (n=2), and Nevada (n=1). The following sub-categories had food banks with missing partner agency data: Independent (n=2), Alaska (n=1), and California (n=1). Thus, the following categories had missing data for revenue per partner agency: Independent (n=5), Alaska (n=1), California (n=3), and Nevada (n=1).

Resources by Food Bank Type

Food banks in the Feeding America Network tended to be larger than independent food banks by both revenue and number of partner agencies, though there were differences among Feeding America food banks, Feeding America PDO food banks, and the Feeding America RDO food bank (Table 6.1). In the food bank census, the Feeding America Network controlled $4.62 billion annually (85% of all revenue in the census) and had 16,695 partner agencies (67% of all

partner agencies in the census). On average, independent food banks had annual revenue of $15 million (n=56) and 143 partners (n=57), while food banks in the Feeding America Network had annual revenues of $55 million and 199 partners. In the Feeding America Network, member food banks were largest, with average annual revenue of $76.2 million and 270 partners. However, Feeding America PDOs were smaller than Feeding America members, and they had annual revenues similar to the average independent food bank. PDOs had an average annual revenue of $15.2 million and 64 partner agencies. The only RDO in the food bank census (Berkeley Food Network in CA) was small, with annual revenue of $471,000 and 50 partner agencies.

Food banks in the Feeding America Network tended to be larger in scale than independent food banks, but the latter had greater revenue per partner agency. Independent food banks averaged $397,000 in annual revenue per partner agency and Feeding America Network food banks averaged $317,000. Independent food banks had higher revenues per partner agency than all types of food banks affiliated with the Feeding America Network. Annual revenue per partner agency was $338,000 for Feeding America member food banks, $287,000 for Feeding America PDOs, and $9,417 for the Feeding America RDO. On average, independent food banks had 25% more resources per partner agency than food banks in the Feeding America Network.

Regarding rates for being TEFAP providers, food banks in the Feeding America Network (96.4%) had much higher rates than independent food banks (32.2%), suggesting that the Feeding America Network administered federal food assistance programs more frequently. This likely reflects the close history of Feeding America and the federal government (see Chapter 2). Another factor that surfaced during the interviews was that some religious independent food banks chose not to distribute the TEFAP program so that they could include prayer as part of their in-kind food assistance programs.

Food banks also differed in scale across states (Table 6.1). California and Texas, the two largest states, had the greatest total amount of food bank revenue and number of partner agencies as expected. California food banks report $2.47 billion of revenue annually, and Texas food banks $1.69 billion. California and Texas also had the largest number of partner agencies, with 11,259 and 5,661, respectively, reflecting these being the two largest states by population.[38] However, these states do not host the largest food banks, on average. Nevada had the largest food bank resources by mean annual revenue ($62.5 million), followed by Missouri ($60.2 million) and Texas ($56.4 million). The states with the smallest food banks by average annual revenue were Alaska ($6.41 million), Hawaii ($17.1 million), and New Mexico ($20 million). States with the largest food banks by mean number of partner agencies were Oklahoma (319), Missouri (314), and Nevada (304), and the smallest were Alaska (81), New Mexico (102), and Louisiana (113). Of the nine states in the food bank census, the highest average revenues per partner agency were found at food banks in California ($419,000), Nevada ($396,000), and Louisiana ($383,000), and the lowest were Alaska ($76,000), Hawaii ($104,000), and New Mexico ($116,000). This means California food banks, on average, had more than five times as many resources per partner agency than Alaska food banks. These trends demonstrate large variations in food bank resources that warrant further attention regarding how accessible the resources are across populations.

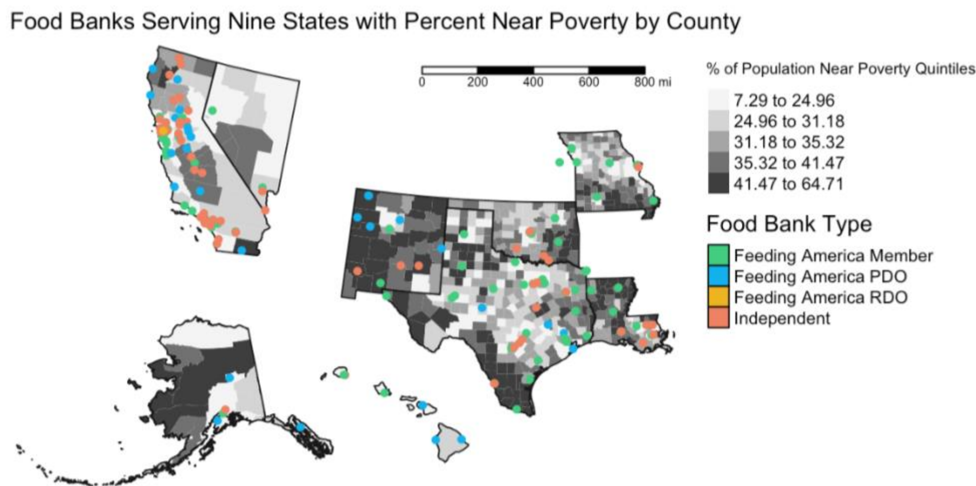
[38] Since food bank service areas did cross state lines, I compare the characteristics of food banks present in each state rather than putting these descriptive statistics in the context of state population demographics. Therefore, I do not control for variables, such as population size and population near poverty, at the state level.

Descriptive Statistics on Food Bank Resources within 100 Miles

I now examine differences in the amount of food bank resources available across locations with disparate demographics. I first examine food bank resources in relation to poverty, race, and urbanicity, followed by how food bank resources differ along combinations of these dimensions. Since food banks are responding to material hardship, their resources would ideally be concentrated in areas in which more of the population is experiencing economic hardship in the form of having income near the poverty threshold. Having greater food bank resources in such places would represent community responsiveness to need because more resources would be located near those who need them, helping to distribute them equitably.

Figure 6.2

Types of Food Banks in Relation to County-level Poverty Rates



Note. The percentage of the population in poverty is broken into quintiles to show variation on the map. Alaska and Hawaii have been moved, and their scale has been adjusted using the “shift_geometry()” function in the tigris package.

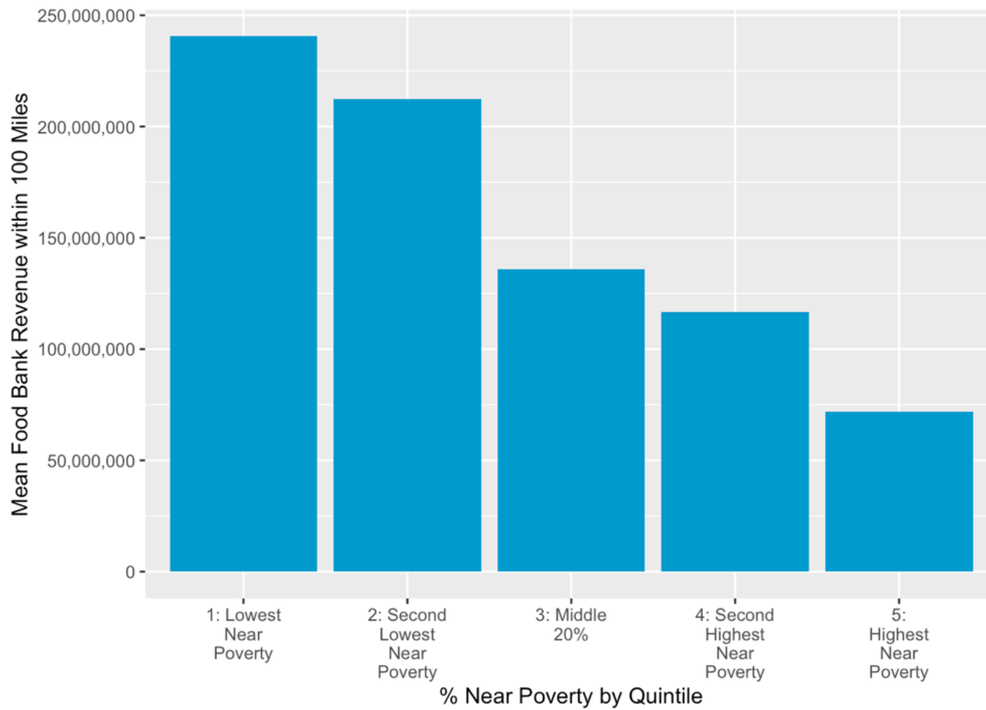
Figure 6.2 shows that, in general, counties with the highest poverty rates do not host food banks. The patterns hold across multiple states, with particular concentrations of high levels of near poverty without food banks occurring in north-central Alaska, New Mexico, southwestern Texas, western Oklahoma, southern Missouri, and northern Louisiana. The map is useful for visualizing distances between counties and food banks, but a map at this scale makes it difficult to see near which populations food banks are located. I also include measures of accessibility in bar graphs to show differences among counties based on demographics.

Counties were grouped into quintiles based on the percentage of the population that was experiencing near poverty. Examining which counties had the greatest amount of food bank resources, the 20% of counties with the lowest proportion of residents experiencing near poverty had the greatest amount of resources nearby, averaging over $241 million in resources. The 20% of counties with the highest proportion of the population experiencing near poverty averaged less than $71.8 million. The middle 20% of counties had nearly twice the resources ($136 million) in comparison to counties with the highest percentage near poverty.

These patterns suggest spatial mismatch between the availability of food bank resources and their proximity to poverty and, therefore, those who need them. Strong (2020) theorized that reductions to state-administered welfare policies, and the coinciding growth of food banking, localize the responsibility of feeding people, which disadvantages people in areas with fewer resources. The spatial mismatch that appears in Figure 6.3 corroborates this argument.

Figure 6.3

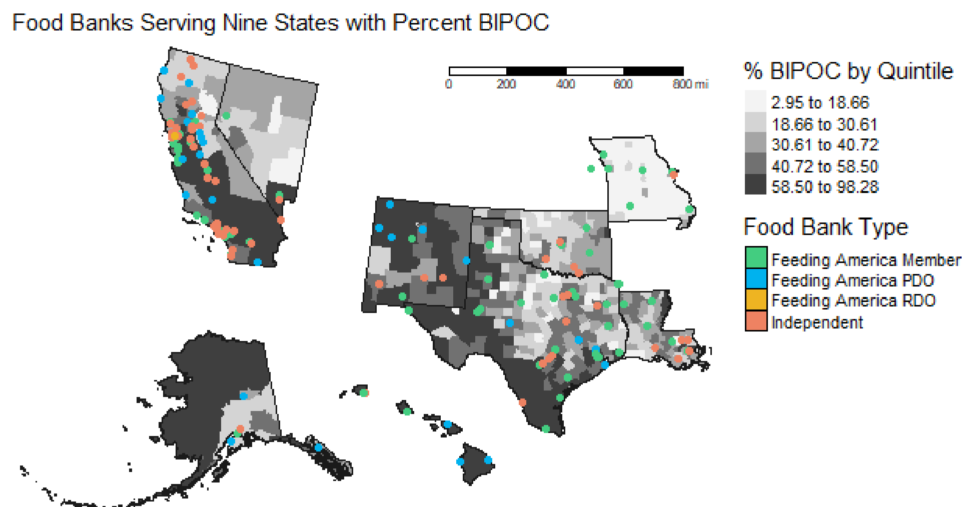
Total Food Bank Revenue (in $) within 100 miles of Counties by Near Poverty Rates



In addition to examining food bank resources in relation to near poverty, I also assess the distribution of food bank resources in relation to race. Figure 6.4 shows that many counties with the highest BIPOC population have no food banks, despite BIPOC communities experiencing greater food insecurity rates than their white counterparts. This is particularly true in northern Alaska, southwest Texas, and throughout New Mexico, many of the same counties with no food banks and the highest levels of near poverty (Figure 6.2). Many counties in northern Nevada and Oklahoma, which are more reflective of median counties in terms of racial demographics, are also far from food banks. Food banks are also absent in many counties in Missouri, which are predominately White.

Figure 6.4

Types of Food Banks in Relation to County-Level Race Demographics



Note. The percentage of the population that is BIPOC is broken into quintiles to show variation on the map. Alaska and Hawaii have been moved, and their scale has been adjusted using the "shift_geometry()" function in the tigris package.

The amount of nearby food bank resources varied greatly between rural and urban areas. On average, urban counties had $247 million of food bank resources within 100 miles, while rural counties had only $105 million. This supports Warshawsky's (2023) argument that the food bank model was designed to work in urban areas. However, these disparities do not account for population size, which I control for in the spatial accessibility measure used during regression analysis. Nevertheless, these results highlight disparities in the amount of food bank resources nearby. Since I found that urban counties had nearly 2.5 times the resources of rural counties, I also explored how resources differed by poverty and race in both urban and rural counties.

Examining the interaction between urbanicity and poverty also aligns with analyses in extant research on spatial access to food assistance (Bacon & Baker, 2017; Waity, 2016).

Examining patterns between access to food bank revenue and the proportion of the population near poverty separately in urban and rural counties shows trends that were unapparent when all counties were included (see Figures 6.3 and 6.5). In urban counties, a pattern of spatial mismatch is clear since more resources are available in counties with the lowest proportion of the population near poverty. Urban counties that have greater proportions of the population near poverty have progressively fewer resources, with the exception of counties in the second highest quintile of near poverty having more resources than the middle 20%. Urban counties with the lowest proportion of the population near poverty have a mean of $336 million in food bank resources nearby, and urban counties with the highest proportion of people near poverty have a mean of $69 million. This means that urban counties with the greatest need have approximately one-fifth of the food bank resources of urban counties with the lowest proportion of residents near poverty. Urban counties, therefore, have a clear pattern of spatial mismatch when examining food bank revenue within 100 miles in relation to the proportion of the population near poverty.

Rural counties do not have as steep of a trend as urban counties; there is less variation in the quantity of resources proximate to rural counties. Though rural counties with the second lowest proportion of the population near poverty have an average of $151 million of food bank resources, and rural counties with the highest proportion of the population have an average of $72 million. Still, the two quintiles of counties with the greatest proportion of the population experiencing poverty have the fewest resources. This distribution of resources in rural counties does not reflect community responsiveness, in which the counties with the greatest need have the most resources available to them.

Figure 6.5

Total Food Bank Revenue (in $) within 100 Miles of Counties by Near Poverty Rates and Urbanicity

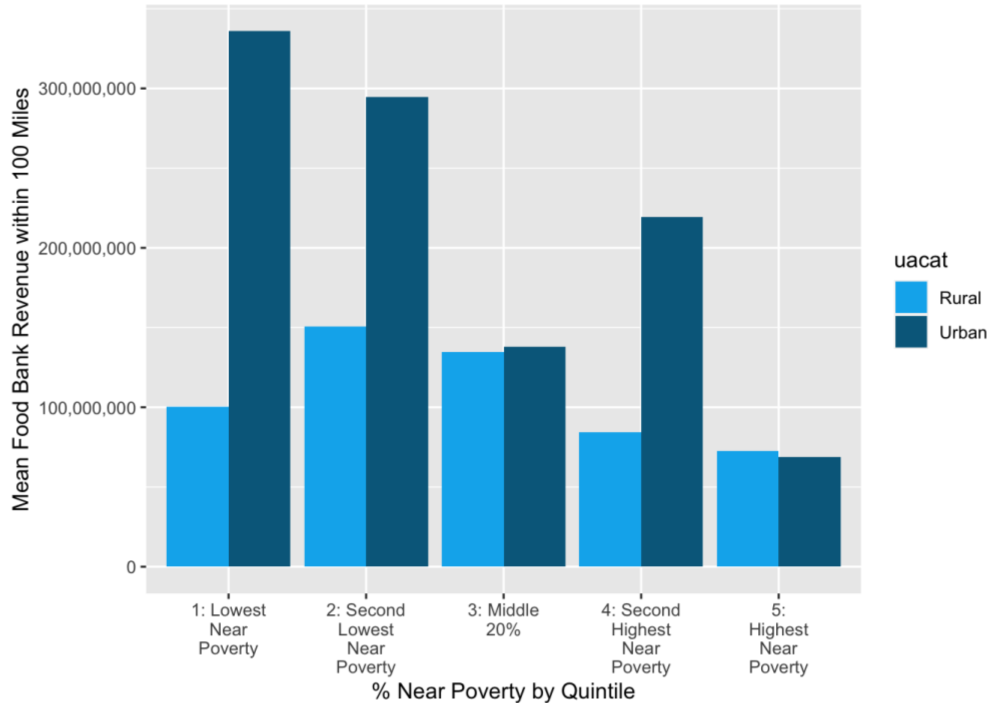


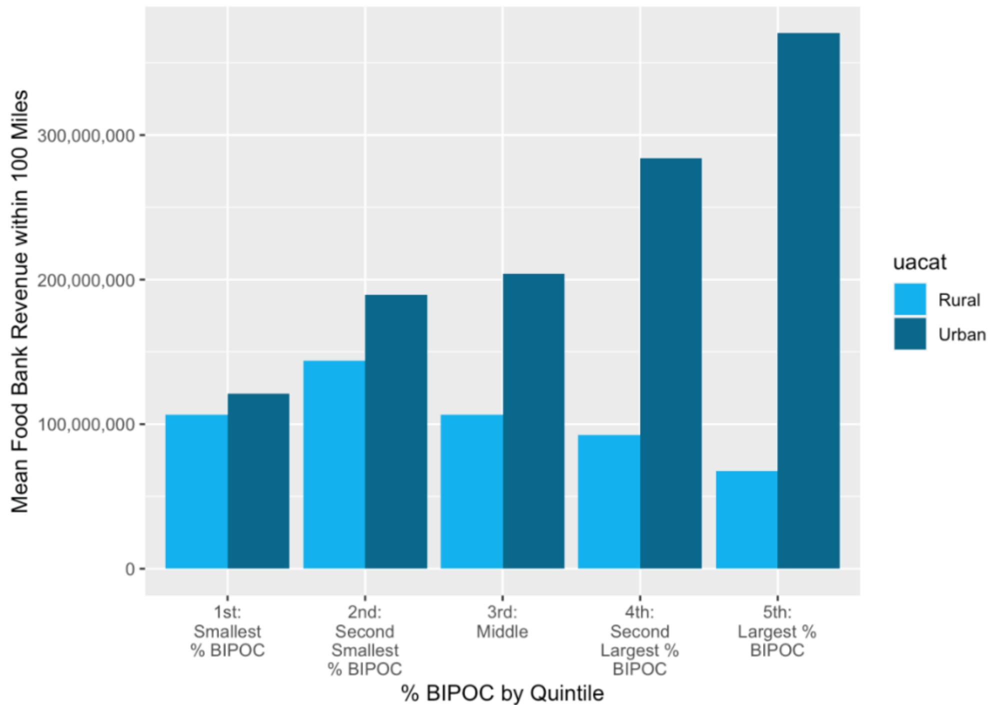
Figure 6.5 shows clear differences between the food bank revenues of urban and rural counties in the food bank census with the lowest percentage of the population near poverty. Among counties with the lowest proportions of the population in poverty, rural counties have an average of $100 million in food bank resources, and urban counties of the comparable quintile of near poverty have an average of $336 million. This is a resource gap of urban counties having $236 million more in food bank resources than rural counties. However, the gap in the quantity of resources available between urban and rural counties reduces when examining counties with proportions of near poverty closest to the median (urban counties have $3.3 million more food bank resources than rural counties). In counties with the greatest proportion of the population

near poverty, urban counties have an average of $3.4 million fewer food bank resources than rural counties. This is concerning because among counties with the highest rates of poverty, urban counties have nearly seven times as many residents.

Examining differing degrees of resources among urban and rural food banks in relation to racial demographics also demonstrates differences (Figure 6.6). Rural counties tended to have fewer resources available to them as the proportion of BIPOC residents increased. Rural counties with the lowest proportions of BIPOC residents have an average of $107 million in food bank resources nearby, while rural counties with the highest proportions of BIPOC residents have an average of $67 million. This means that rural counties with the smallest proportions of BIPOC residents have 1.5 times the food bank resources of rural counties with the highest proportion. This points to racial inequities in the availability of food bank resources among rural counties, where rural counties with the highest proportion of BIPOC residents, on average, have fewer resources than counties with the highest proportion of White residents. Still, these results do not include controls for population size and the proportion of the population near poverty. Among urban counties, more resources were proximate to counties with the largest proportion of BIPOC residents. Urban counties with the largest proportion of BIPOC residents have three times as many resources as urban counties with the lowest proportion. This might point to community responsiveness in urban areas since BIPOC communities experience food insecurity disproportionately (Bowen et al., 2021; Rabbitt et al., 2023). However, this pattern changes during regression analysis when the total population nearby is accounted for and the percentage near poverty is held constant.

Figure 6.6

Total Food Bank Revenue (in $) within 100 miles of Counties by Race and Urbanicity

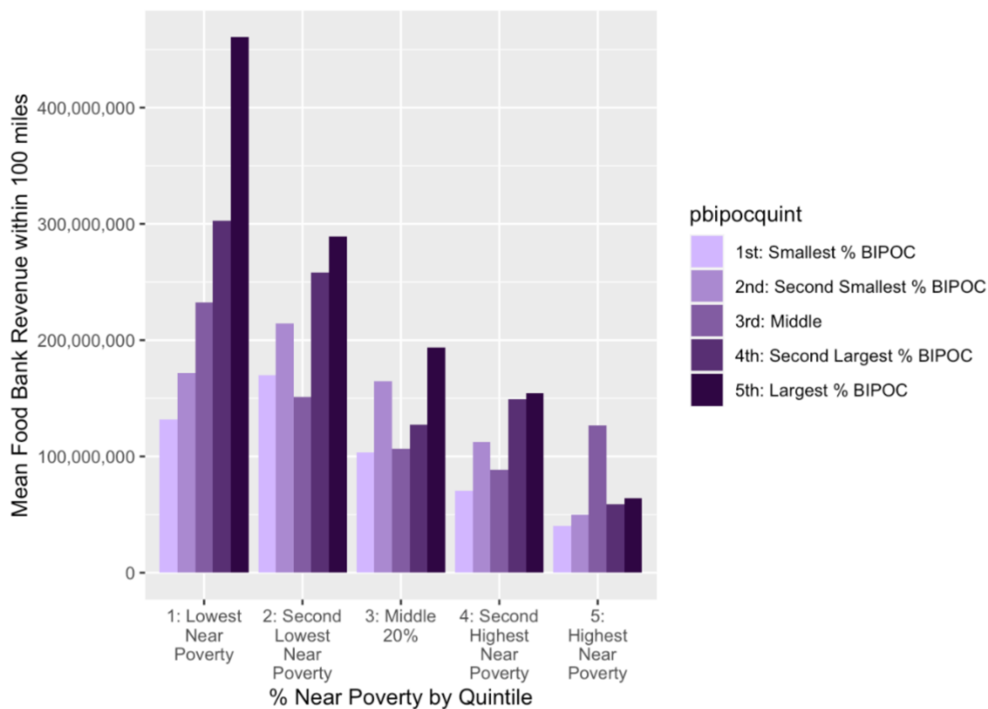


Further analysis of counties grouped by quintiles of both race and near poverty does not suggest that differences in average food bank revenue by county racial demographics are due to community responsiveness (Figure 6.7). Counties with the most food bank resources have the lowest proportion of residents near poverty and the highest proportion of BIPOC residents, and, on average, they had $461 million in food bank resources nearby. This is seven times the amount of resources near counties with similar racial demographics and the highest proportion of residents near poverty, who have, on average, $64 million in food bank resources nearby. Within each quintile of counties with similar racial demographics, counties with the lowest proportion of residents near poverty have more resources than those with the highest portion of residents near poverty. Counties with the lowest proportion in poverty share the trend of positive association in

urban food banks between the amount of resources and proportion of the population that is BIPOC. Outside of counties with the lowest proportion of the population in poverty, the relationship between racial demographics and food bank resources is less clear, since no quintiles have linear relationships.

Figure 6.7

Total Food Bank Revenue (in $) within 100 Miles of Counties by Near Poverty Rates and Race



These statistics provide insights into which types of counties have the most food bank resources nearby. Since this is based on a census of food banks within these nine states, the results indicate the total amount of resources nearby. However, this analysis does not control for three variables at once, and it does not account for the differing sizes of populations in these counties. Therefore, I conducted spatial regression analysis on the accessibility of food bank

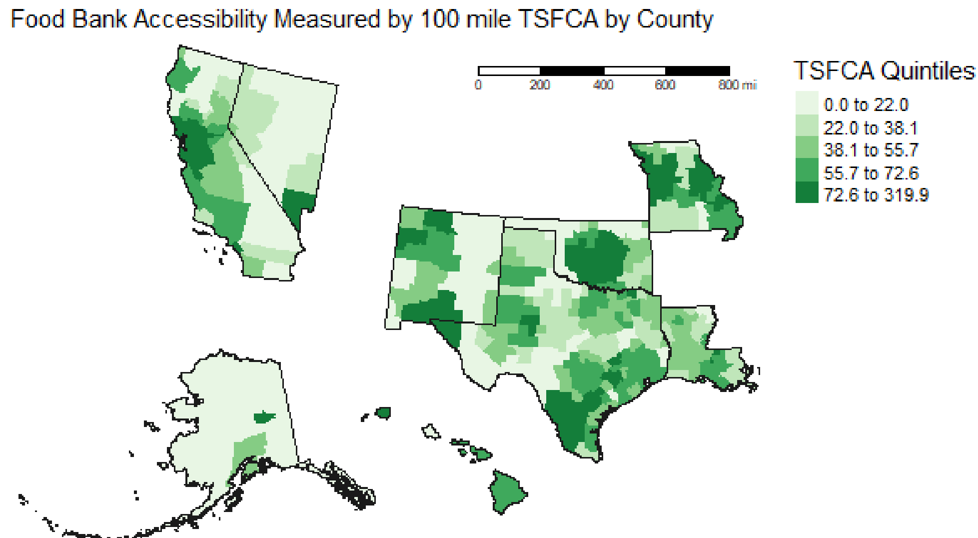
resources using a measure of accessibility that accounts for relative demands based on the sizes of nearby populations.

Spatial Regression Analysis

Drawing from extant literature, I tested models that examine the distribution of food bank resources in relation to poverty, race, and urbanicity. I tested nested models that included these three variables and every combination of interactions between them, both OLS and spatial error models, but I found that the spatial error models offered better fit according to the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). The spatial error models helped control for the positive spatial autocorrelation of the dependent variable seen through the clustering of spatial accessibility in Figure 6.8 and through a statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) global Moran's I (Getis, 2010). The Robust Lagrange Multiplier Tests also indicated that the spatial error model offered a significantly better fit than the OLS model, and also a better fit than a spatial lag model (Anselin et al., 1996). I therefore report results from spatial error modeling. For clarity, I report results only for the base model with no interactions and the best-fitting model based on AIC.

Figure 6.8

County-Level Food Bank Accessibility as Measured with TSFCA at 100 Miles



Note. Alaska and Hawaii have been moved, and their scales have been adjusted using the "shift_geometry()" function in the tigris package.

The dependent variable of food bank accessibility, measured using TSFCA, does not have unit values, which makes it difficult to interpret the magnitude of differences in meaningful units. I offer some understanding of differences in TSFCA scores by examining how they are distributed among counties in the food bank census. TSFCA scores indicate greater or lower access to food bank resources, with higher values indicating greater access. Counties with TSFCA scores under the 20th percentile, those with the lowest accessibility to food bank resources, have scores from 0 to 22. Counties in the 20th to 40th percentile have TSFCA scores that range from 22 to 38.1, and the middle 20% have scores from 38.1 to 55.7. Counties with higher access to food banks in the 60th to 80th percentiles have scores of 55.7 to 72.6, and the 20% with the highest TSFCA scores have a broader range from 72.6 to 319.9. A few outliers

were evident, since only nine counties had scores over 140. The six counties with the highest TSFCA scores were in Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas.[39]

Table 6.2

Spatial Error Model Regression Results with Building Models

	Spatial Error Model		
	Base	**Best-Fitting**	**All Interactions**
% Near Poverty (185%)	0.179	-0.168	-0.161
	(-0.153)	(-0.152)	(0.172)
Urban	-1.701	10.127**	10.661
	(-2.613)	(-4.72)	(7.994)
% BIPOC	0.205**	0.311***	.310***
	(-0.082)	(-0.089)	(0.090)
% BIPOC*Urban		-0.309***	-.304***
		(-0.102)	(.114)
% Near Poverty (185%):Urban			-0.022
			(.261)
Constant	52.916***	49.026***	48.832***
	(-6.298)	(-6.485)	(6.865)
Observations	653	653	653
Log Likelihood	-3,067.16	-3,062.67	-3,062.67
sigma2	595.915	584.675	584.739
Akaike Inf. Crit.	6,146.32	6,139.34	6,141.33
Wald Test (df = 1)	817.969***	881.797***	880.295***
LR Test (df = 1)	365.086***	373.973***	366.831***

Note. Dependent variable is food bank accessibility, measured using TSFCA with 100-mile distance.

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

The base spatial error model included the percent near poverty, urbanicity, and the percentage of the population that is BIPOC, and the dependent variable of spatial accessibility of food bank resources measured using TSFCA (Table 6.2). The base spatial error model showed

[39] The highest TSFCA score was in Kauai County, Hawaii, which is likely influenced by Hawaii Food Bank having locations on both Oahu and Kauai. I divided resources evenly among food banks with multiple branches since I had no way of knowing how each food bank divides resources among multiple locations. Kauai also has the Kauai Independent Food Bank. A buffer of 200 miles reduces Kauai's accessibility, but it also suggests that there is more competition for Kauai's resources than is likely, since residents and partner agencies are likely not traveling between unconnected islands to access food assistance.

no correlation between food bank accessibility and the percentage of the population near poverty, so the hypothesis of spatial matching between food bank resources and people in need of food assistance was not supported. It also showed no correlation between food bank accessibility and urbanicity. The base spatial error model indicates that there is a positive relationship between the percentage of the population that is BIPOC and food bank accessibility. However, the best-fitting model shows that urbanicity moderates this relationship, changing the direction in urban areas. This interaction suggests disparities between rural and urban areas.

The best-fitting model included the percent near poverty, urbanicity, the percent BIPOC, and the interaction between the percent BIPOC and urbanicity as independent variables, and the dependent variable of spatial accessibility of food bank resources measured using TSFCA (Table 6.2). Adding the interaction between race and urbanicity showed differences in food bank accessibility between rural and urban areas, and how urbanicity moderates the relationship between food bank accessibility and the percentage of the population that is BIPOC. The best-fitting model did not show a significant relationship (and the association show was negative) between the percentage of the population near poverty and the accessibility of food bank resources. Thus, the hypothesis that food bank accessibility is responsive to need when controlling for urbanicity, race, and their interaction was not supported.

When including the interaction between urbanicity and the percent of the population that is BIPOC, both variables and their interaction have significant coefficients. In comparison to the base model, including the interaction between race and urbanicity results in a positive association between urbanicity and food bank accessibility. When controlling for the other variables in the model, urban counties have TSFCA scores that are 10.1 units higher than rural counties. This difference has a substantial relative magnitude because 80% of counties have TSFCA scores

between 0 and 72.6. Importantly, when compared to descriptive statistics, TSFCA accounts for demands from nearby population sizes.

With the interaction between racial composition and urbanicity in the best-fitting model, the coefficient for the percent of the population that is BIPOC is reflective of the association between racial composition and food bank accessibility in rural counties. In rural counties, there is a significant positive association between the percentage of the population that is BIPOC and food bank accessibility. In rural counties, for every ten-percentage-point increase to the percent of the population that is BIPOC, a county's TSFCA score is expected to increase by 3.11, with all other variables in the model held constant. The relationship is significant, but its magnitude only compares to that of the coefficient for urbanicity with an approximate increase of 33 percentage points to the percent of the population that is BIPOC. Thus, while rural counties with larger BIPOC populations are expected to have greater access to resources than predominately White rural counties, rural counties are still expected to have substantially fewer resources than comparable urban counties when the percentage of the population near poverty is held constant.

In the best-fitting model, the significant coefficient for the interaction term between racial composition and urbanicity suggests an association between racial composition and food bank accessibility in urban counties. This coefficient indicates a negative association between the percentage of the population that is BIPOC and food bank accessibility in urban counties. The coefficient is of similar magnitude to the coefficient that describes the relationship between racial composition and food bank accessibility in rural counties, but it is in the opposite direction. Thus, for every ten-percentage-point increase to the percent of an urban county's population that is BIPOC, a county's TSFCA score is expected to decrease by 3.09 points, holding all other variables in the model constant. This suggests inequitable access to food bank

resources, since urban counties with greater proportions of residents who are BIPOC are expected to have access to fewer resources in comparison to urban counties that have greater proportions of White residents when the percent of the population near poverty is held constant.

I also ran the model, which differs from the best-fitting model by adding an interaction term between the percentage of the population near poverty and urbanicity (Table 6.2). In this model, both race and the interaction between race and urbanicity remain statistically significant and have coefficients of similar magnitudes in the same directions. However, urbanicity loses its significance when also interacted with the percentage of the population near poverty. Since the coefficient for urbanicity does not decrease in magnitude, it seems that this additional interaction may be a case of stretching the model that could be further explored with a broader dataset. This model also did not show a relationship between the percentage of the population near poverty and access to food bank resources, thus failing to support the hypothesis of community responsiveness.

Regression analysis suggests that food bank resources are not distributed equitably in these nine states. Rural and urban areas have differing degrees of food bank resources, and urbanicity moderates the relationship between racial composition and food bank accessibility. Urban counties have disproportionately more access to food bank resources, and rural areas have fewer resources, even after accounting for the proportion of people near poverty and demands from the county and other nearby populations. Differences in rural and urban access to food bank resources, and differences in spatial access to food bank resources for communities with disparate racial compositions, also surfaced during the interviews, when the food bank administrators discussed how they served their regions and which populations experienced the most barriers to access.

Spatial Variation in Access to Resources According to Food Bank Administrators

My interviews with food bank administrators helped me refine and validate methodological choices for measuring and modeling food bank access. They also highlighted that spatial inequities exist at the operational level within counties, beyond inequities measured at the county level, based on the location of food bank resources. Some of these patterns were discussed in Chapter 3, when the administrators discussed efforts to develop partner agency networks and mobile food distributions in response to geographic gaps in coverage based on race and rurality. Attention to spatial inequities was particularly prominent at the county level since many food banks measured their success in relation to Feeding America's MPIN metrics, discussed in Chapter 4. These were also sometimes accompanied by more detailed maps of gaps in food assistance programs within a county in relation to demographics as food banks paid more attention to equity. These were ways the administrators were implementing programs and metrics to address known spatial inequities. However, they tended to be newer initiatives and relate to smaller programs within food banks. Below, I highlight recurring patterns that emerged during the interviews regarding administrators' discussions of the distribution of resources throughout geographic regions, focusing on the locations of food assistance distributions, the logistics of food transportation, and geographic variation in food bank funding.

Locations of Food Assistance Distributions

In interviews, food bank administrators described that the locations of food bank distributions tended to be located more heavily in communities closest to them. These distribution locations were positioned closer to food banks, which tended to be in urban areas, due to the ways their partner agency networks had developed over time and due to operational

constraints regarding perishability of foods that primary food markets had categorized as food waste.

The administrators described how partner agency networks developed based on the initiative and resources of partner agencies, where food banks typically worked with well-resourced partners that contacted them without considering community needs. For example, Scott, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described how his food bank's network developed:

> Historically, so long as we are passing out the food in the community, we were happy…. Food banks, historically, we've been kind of path of least resistance for our distributions. Is that actually [the] area of greatest need? Maybe. Maybe the church that is serving the greatest need is this really low-resource church, and so they can't keep up unless we help them. (Scott, 2021)

He points out the shortfalls of food banks' historical lack of attention to the needs of communities. He went on to say that his food bank is planning to pay more attention to inequitable dynamics to improve their impact (Scott, 2021).

Ron similarly explained that when he took over as CEO of a Feeding America food bank, he realized that it was overemphasizing its own urban county and underemphasizing the rural counties it served, stating:

> Part of it is just convenience, and part of it is just probably awareness. We're in the county; people were probably more aware of us. We also really hadn't done any real work to try to build up partnerships. (Ron, 2021)

Ron reported how spatial proximity and geographically proximate social ties influenced development of his food bank's partner agencies in ways that privileged partner agencies located in the same city in which his food bank operates. This corresponds with Brinkley's (2017) findings of the Chester County, PA local food network. She found the food bank connected with organizations that are spatially proximate, whereas other local food system organizations had more geographically distant connections (Brinkley, 2017).

Beyond the influence of stronger social ties within the communities of which they are located, food banks' own distribution sites were also influenced by logistical constraints of distributing rapidly expiring food. For example, Keith, a Feeding America PDO executive director, described geographic differences in his food bank's direct food distributions. He said that they result from the perishability of food, particularly food waste donations, as a resource that must be distributed promptly:

> We distribute as much food as we can throughout the county Monday through Friday. And then come Friday, it's like, "Oh, some of it we weren't able to get rid of." Let's essentially host one last big distribution here in [the town where the warehouse is located] to avoid a product going into the landfill. (Keith, 2021)

He described that his food bank tries to distribute food assistance equitably throughout the county, but provides extra food in the town where it is located to prevent food from spoiling over the weekend. Keith highlighted the perishability of food that will not last several days.

When a food bank is distributing food that will perish within three days, distance barriers between food banks, partner agencies, and the communities they serve are heightened because food must be distributed quickly and frequently. Simply increasing food amounts and minimizing trips to distant locations does not provide the same access to food, particularly perishable foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy, and meats. If a food bank is trying to minimize costs, it cannot simply provide the same foods in greater bulk at a distant direct distribution. Such access and usability issues are further heightened among people from disadvantaged groups, such as those experiencing homelessness, with dietary restrictions, and with physical disabilities (Haynes Stein, 2023). Partner agencies experience the same barriers but on a different scale. A small food pantry might not have the refrigeration and freezer space to accept larger amounts of perishable food at one time. It might also experience the same issue when

redistributing food to clients who need support throughout the month, rather than just needing assistance once a month.

Keith's food bank tried to distribute food equitably throughout its service area but provided extra food where it was located due to material constraints. However, other food banks sometimes chose to provide different services to different locations. Mary, executive director of an independent food bank, reported that most of her food bank's direct distribution programs served only the county in which it was located (Mary, 2021). She said that the only programs that served broader multi-county service areas were partner agencies and a program for seniors (Mary, 2021). The soup kitchen run by Mary's food bank also allowed people from any county to attend, but it was offered only at the main building, and I suspect that transportation costs to get to the kitchen from neighboring counties outweighed the economic benefits of one free meal. When asked who experiences the most barriers to accessing the organization's programs, Mary said, "People that lack transportation," emphasizing geographic disparities in accessing food bank resources (Mary, 2021).

Food banks recognized that within their networks, food tends to flow to better-resourced areas rather than areas with the most need (Costanzo, 2022c). During the pandemic, they worked to change this trend by creating distribution locations in areas with the most need (Costanzo, 2022c). More than half of administrators (58%) described efforts that targeted where their direct distributions and partner agencies were located in relationship to race, income, need, or client location data. This process demonstrates how being reflexive about potential geographic gaps enables food banks to address them through either direct distribution programs, mobile pantries, or intentionally seeking new partners. Craig, a Feeding America food bank CEO, described this process:

> We've been doing some heat maps recently of areas where we serve and overlapping populations and income levels…. We're really proud that we've got a very strong presence in [City X], where there's a lot of need, and I happen to live. And then these heat maps showed us these little pockets within [City X] that we weren't serving. (Craig, 2021)

This example demonstrates that the food bank model depends greatly on the locations and resources of partner agencies to distribute throughout a service area. Craig's food bank was seeking to remedy this by supplementing its partner agency network with direct distributions. When food banks increased direct distribution during the pandemic, they were better able to fill these gaps, *if* they took the time to evaluate potential disparities reflexively.

Transportation of Food to Partner Agencies

Geographic discrepancies also persisted within food banks' partner agency networks based on distances between partner agencies and a food bank. The interviews revealed that distribution of in-kind food to partner agencies occurs through three methods—the food bank transports food to a partner agency, the partner agency picks up the food from the food bank's warehouse, or the food bank allows its partners to pick up food from one of its contracted donors (typically as part of the Feeding America network).[40] The first two require food to be transported from the food bank to the partner agency, which is more expensive and time-consuming when partner agencies are located further from food banks. For the second two options, the partner agency must cover transportation costs, including renting or owning a van or truck (sometimes with refrigeration), hiring a driver, and buying fuel.

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[40] The National Feeding America Organization's contracts govern many national corporations' food donations, prohibiting them from donating food to organizations outside of the Feeding America Network. Feeding America food banks are also contractually obligated to accept these corporations' excess food, even if it is undesirable or located far away. In some cases, Feeding America-affiliated food banks supply partner agencies with resources by permitting them to pick up this food.

For food banks, it is easiest if partner agencies come to the food bank to pick up food. Troy, CEO of a Feeding America food bank located in an urban area whose service area included rural locations over 100 miles away, described resource distribution to partner agencies as a push-and-pull dynamic:

> It's either a push or a pull. And the pull is those organizations have access to our website where they can literally see the inventory. And similar to shopping on Amazon, they would choose the items that they need…. Those organizations that pull product then would put in their order and then come to the warehouse to pick up. Then you've got the other side of that, which is the push, and that is where the food bank might be working to actually coordinate the selection and provides delivery and distribution assistance in those counties or communities. (Troy, 2021)

He discussed that organizations that could afford their own transportation were able to select foods as if they were shopping, while his food bank pushed food to other partner agencies to fulfill MPIN requirements to serve each county. Such discrepancies influenced both the types of food that partner agencies received and the frequency with which they could get food, a crucial factor for highly perishable foods and partner agencies with limited storage capacities.

Even in urban areas, partner agencies were impeded by distances shorter than 100 miles. One CEO of an independent food bank (who I do not name due to the relative rarity of adding new locations), reported that adding a new warehouse location less than an hour away led to new connections with partner agencies. He said they added more than 50 new partner agencies and quadrupled the number of schools in the area at which they were distributing backpack programs (Anonymous independent food bank CEO, 2021). Through a comparison of partner connections and distributions in the area prior to the new warehouse location, the CEO demonstrated the influence relatively small distances have on a food bank’s ability to foster connections and distribute food in an area. When further describing the benefits of the new location, he

highlighted that partner agencies were able to pick up food more quickly, and that clients in the area could access direct distributions from the food bank more easily.

Geographic Disparities in Food Bank Funding and Donations

Geographic disparities in resource distribution discussed during the interviews also arose from funding availability, funder specifications, and the location of retail food waste. These patterns indicate that some areas are better resourced in terms of organizational infrastructure and sources of food bank revenue, which likely contributed to some of the disparities between rural and urban food banks during quantitative analysis.

One Feeding America food bank CEO (whom I do not name due to the rarity of food bank acquisitions), described the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of another food bank. Her urban food bank acquired the other location when the existing nonprofit said it would no longer operate a food bank. When her food bank spoke to the previous managers, she learned that in the rural county, “there wasn't enough of a donor base out there to raise enough money to run it the way that regional food banks should be run” (Anonymous Feeding America food bank CEO, 2021). This instance demonstrates how food banking localizes responsibility to communities.

Another food bank that served five counties described operating more programs in the county in which it was located due to receiving funding from the county’s CARES grants to target distributions in census areas in the county with lower incomes. Such relationships are not specifically tied to the location of a warehouse, but more opportunities like this develop in the immediate vicinity of food banks, since administrators described connections to the local governments in the city and county in which they were located. Most food banks are located in urban areas. Since Feeding America apportions every county in the United States to a Feeding

America food bank, many urban organizations are serving broad rural areas. When asked which groups experience the most barriers to accessing their programs, several administrators responded that rural areas did. Bouek (2018a) argues that Feeding America's contracts create a cartel-like network, in which each food bank has a non-overlapping territory to manage to eliminate competition. Since Feeding America has national contracts with retailers that stipulate that their food banks will pick up stores' excess food, member food banks are obligated to pick up the food or delegate it to someone else.

Since food banks have historically been organizations that source and redistribute food to other nonprofits, this expectation aligns with historical forms in which food banks' role is to be efficient sorting hubs. Given Feeding America's contracts, nonprofit agencies had to partner with Feeding America food banks to access donations themselves from national retailers. However, several administrators highlighted that their food banks had redelegated the picking up of food from grocery store donors to be performed by their partner agencies. Justin, a Feeding America food bank CEO, highlighted the inefficiencies of his urban food bank acting as a hub for all donations because its service area also included a substantial rural area. He said, "We have the agencies doing [the retail store pickup and redistributing amongst themselves] now so that the food gets to them faster" (Justin, 2021). He highlighted that the system is especially inefficient because food banking shifted toward more excess, fresh food donations that spoil quickly. His food bank's role in these situations is now "owning" retail donations rather than logistically procuring, managing, and redistributing food to partner agencies.

Conclusion

By examining food bank revenues across nine states in the food bank census, I found substantial variations in the resources that food banks have. These resources vary by both food bank type and location. I find differences between Feeding America and independent food banks. Feeding America food banks tend to be better resourced, which might reflect their consolidation of resources and contracts with donors in the U.S. food bank system. Combined, Feeding America and independent food banks in these nine states control over $5 billion of resources annually, highlighting the importance of paying attention to how resources in the food bank sector are managed, particularly regarding equity.

I found that the accessibility of food bank resources does not correspond with equitable access; urban areas have far greater access to food bank resources than rural areas do. However, I found that access among urban areas is distributed inequitably according to race. Urban counties with a greater percentage of BIPOC residents have less access to food bank resources than comparable predominately White counties, pointing to inequities in food bank access. I do not find that food bank resources correlate with the proportion of the population near poverty, suggesting that such food bank resources are not responsive to community needs and thus might further inequities. These findings are supported further by the interviews, which pointed to mechanisms by which some of these inequities are perpetuated.

From these findings, I argue that uneven distributions of food bank resources are not based on the malignant intentions of food bank administrators; they arise from disparities in regional infrastructural regimes, particularly since administrators depend on donors and funders to obtain resources. However, these resource differences should be examined precisely because of the assumed benevolence of the charitable food system. Inequities in nonprofit resource

distribution have important implications because the government is increasingly privatizing social services to food banks. Political elites have intentionally used the privatization of social services to create racialized burdens and legitimize uneven access to resources (Clemens, 2017; Ray et al., 2023). Relying on a private nonprofit system to distribute charitable aid contrasts with a rights-based approach, furthering people's experiences with inequity (Clemens, 2017; De Souza, 2019; Ray et al., 2023; Riches, 2018). The inequitable spatial distribution of food banks' resources is not an intention of their administrators, but some policymakers' efforts to further distribute resources through this private system, rather than using a rights-based approach, are informed by ideologies that seek to localize responsibility and cement inequities (Clemens, 2017; Ray et al., 2023).

Spatial analysis of food bank resources points to important inequities that are further supported by qualitative analyses. Further attention should be given to understanding not just qualitative differences regarding how food banks operate, but the geographical differences in the large sums of resources that food banks distribute at the national level. The quantitative analyses presented above could assess inequities of resource distribution only in the nine states that were included in the food bank census. These states still contained more than one-quarter of the U.S. population, representing the food bank resources that are available to 90 million people in the country. When food bank resources are not equitably accessible to this many Americans, addressing the question of what it means to rely on these organizations to administer the social safety net is paramount. Localization of responsibility appears to point to greater inequities, rather than being responsive to community needs. When food assistance is administered through a voluntary, charitable system, people who are experiencing food insecurity have few alternatives to demand equitable access to food assistance.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Abbreviations

EBT: Electronic Benefits Transfer

IRS: Internal Revenue Service

SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The U.S. food bank system administers billions of dollars of food each year. Food banks were already institutionalized actors in the private social safety net before Covid-19, but during the pandemic, they experienced massive growth. Both public and private resources were channeled through food banks, solidifying their importance in the United States' limited social safety net. However, food banks' origins centered the solution of redistributing food waste, and they have since tried use this model to address entrenched problems of hunger and poverty. The food bank organizational model is built on distributing food in-kind. The historical role that food banks have played in the private food assistance network is sourcing excess food from a variety of sources and redistributing it to both other nonprofit organizations and people in need. The definition of a food bank that I use, based on the extant literature, requires food bank organizations to distribute food in-kind. However, I find that food bank are expanding their work to increasingly center ending hunger and poverty. Through tracing the history of the development of U.S. charitable and food assistance programs, I provide context for how contemporary food banks align their work with three competing models of addressing poverty – traditional charity, personal responsibility, and systemic change.

The traditional charity model lies at the core of contemporary food banking, including how most food banks measure their efforts and success. The model pre-dates the first food banks

and has been part of food banking since their invention. Many programs still rely on very traditional ideas of providing food to those that society has moralized as more "deserving" of assistance. For example, most food bank administrators I interviewed in this study had programs that targeted children and seniors; populations considered to be the "deserving poor." Programs of this kind are common despite children and seniors having lower rates of food insecurity than the national average (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). Focused on supplying excess food to alleviate symptoms of poverty, the model does not address the underlying causes of poverty and, therefore, hunger. When food banks orient programs, metrics, and political involvement on maintaining in-kind food distribution, they do not address the underlying problem. Still, there have been recent developments in practices within the traditional charity model to increase accessibility, nutrition, dignity, and diverse needs of clients. Recent innovations in food banking including can be seen in mobile food banks, increased produce distribution, client choice models, and programs that emphasize culturally appropriate foods. This demonstrates new ways that food banks are including equity in work based on the traditional charity model.

The personal responsibility model also includes characteristics that have a prominent place in recent welfare reforms. In food banks, the model addresses food insecurity by individualizing the problem and encouraging food bank clients to make personal changes through job training, nutrition education, and budgeting. This victim-blaming model gained popularity at food banks during the 21st century, despite sociological research that suggests that the individualized work-first approach of PRWORA led to more intense poverty and food insecurity (Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003). Administrators often framed the programs that fit into this model as addressing root causes of hunger, but the issues they discussed were quite individualized. Some discussed more systemic issues, though the programs

they implemented focused on the individual. I have argued in the preceding that it is important to expose the individualization of hunger both in how root causes are framed by food banks and when operationalized as a potential solution. When food banks approach hunger as a systemic issue reflective of racism and poverty, and yet focus on individualized solutions they implicitly support the notion that it is ultimately individuals that are to blame for their experiences of food insecurity. Administrators commonly espoused job training as a means to end the cycle of poverty, but the quality and pay at such jobs in which clients were being trained were often overlooked. As several studies have suggested in relation to workfare programs, job training is a hollow solution if the jobs one is trained for do not provide a living wage (Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003; Rank, 2023). Several food banks that were moving toward the systemic change model were recognizing this issue, at least internally, since they prioritized providing living wages.

The systemic change model addresses the root causes of poverty at a structural level, focusing on how the political-economic system produces poverty and profound inequalities. Among food banks, programs include many strategies that seek to change inequitable power dynamics, particularly those related to income and racial inequality, and create more just public policy. The systemic model highlights that systemic inequities are also reflected in food banking and challenges the notion that food banks can be treated as neutral entities in fighting hunger.

Throughout this research, I explore why food banks align themselves with these models and particularly why individual food banks align themselves with multiple models. I find that organizational legacies and institutional inertia push food banks to maintain the status quo in programming and political advocacy. Like other organizations, food banks also frequently copy other food banks, which increases the spread and durability of existing food banking practices. I

also find that the desires and requirements of donors, funders, and policymakers exert considerable influence on food banks. Private funding means that food banks rely on local donors and regional policymakers to secure resources, which has led to a geographically uneven network that is not able to provide equitable access to resources. Together, these forces largely push food banks to maintain the status quo and continue supporting the corporate food system and larger political economic system. However, I also find that in recent years some food banks have pushed beyond these constraints to take on new approaches grounded in seeking to change political economic structures that produce equity. I briefly summarize each of these findings below, followed by a discussion of the difficult ethical situation in which food banks and their administrators operate, and finally my recommendations for addressing hunger in the U.S. that result from this research.

The infrastructural buy-in of large food distribution operations (see Deener, 2020) combines with institutional inertia (see Brulle and Norgaard 2019; Munck af Rosenschöld at al., 2014) to tie food banks to their early responses to hunger, even though these practices began in the context of expecting food banks to be a short-lived endeavor that would soon go out of business. Food banks are large organizations, most of which have multi-million dollar annual budgets and large existing networks of partner agencies. As organizations that have focused for the past 40 years on redistributing corporate food waste, they have invested considerable time and energy into maintaining and expanding programs to distribute in-kind food. The distribution of in-kind food is a substantial logistical endeavor involving infrastructure like refrigeration, warehouses, and trucks. Furthermore, thousands of other nonprofit organizations and millions of people are consistently relying on food bank resources.

Food bank practices become further entrenched in past practices as food banks replicate the work of other organizations in their fields and respond to the pressures of organizations with power over them. The programs and metrics characteristic of contemporary food banks also involve mimesis as food banks have compared themselves to each other, and their administrators have regularly learned from conferences, state food bank associations, working groups, and webinars. Food banks have also been encouraged to adopt similar programs and metrics based on funding from sources such as the National Feeding America Organization, corporate food actors, and the government. As such, contemporary food banks are fairly homogenous, reflecting strong "isomorphic processes" in their sector (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 153).

Food banks' dependence on localized funding sources has led to heterogenous landscape of food banking resources. I found disparities in the amount of nearby food bank resources based on urbanicity and race. Furthermore, I did not find that food bank resources were responsive to levels of need. Since food bank resources are not distributed equally and are not responsive to need, these findings suggest the need for further research on what factors do influence variation in food bank resources.

Despite pervasive pressures exerted by those in power and uneven access to resources, some food banks are overcoming these pressures to become more responsive to the needs and desires of people experiencing hunger within their organizations. I find that when food banks increasingly focus on equity and seek to incorporate the perspectives and influence of people who have experienced hunger in decision-making roles and processes, they also become more involved in efforts to change the status quo. This means that they are shifting attention away from their prior model of redistributing food waste and toward changing the systemic structures that produce hunger. I find that the renewed attention to equity during the Covid-19 pandemic

bolstered these approaches, although they were also met with pushback amidst the polarized political climate. Still, the burgeoning social justice movement amongst food banks could be a powerful influence on the larger food justice movement, since food banks control a substantial amount of resources and public attention.

The significant power food banks hold underscores the importance of studying food banks' actions as well as the other actors that are influencing their approaches. Food banking reflects the legacy of its creation as primarily a food waste distributor, which has inscribed inequities into the food bank system itself, mirroring some of the very structures and processes many food banks seek to resolve. Food banks should examine such structural inequalities, both in and outside their organizations, because they, too, contribute to how food banking resources are distributed inequitably by urbanicity and race while being unresponsive to communities with greater needs. Food banks are becoming more cognizant of their own position in this and the power they hold to effect change, and some are using this insight to change the status quo, instead of continuing to support programs and strategies that reproduce inequity, poverty, and hunger. The systemic change model aligns with other contemporary social movements also focused on food and social justice. In interviews, I found that when food banks began to adopt practices aligned with the systemic change model, their attention to power structures and equity frequently jumpstarted a sequence of additional organizational changes aligned with the systemic change model.

Feeding People Today and Tomorrow

The food bank administrators I interviewed often talked about the importance of feeding people today and tomorrow. They spoke of it as a moral imperative, suggesting a need to

alleviate existing hunger while preventing future hunger. They recognized the necessity of meeting needs in the present while working toward forward-thinking change. Even CEOs who were at the forefront of using the systemic change model still provided in-kind food because they viewed it as immoral to focus only on systemic causes when people are currently hungry. Sharon, a Feeding America food bank CEO who had experienced food insecurity herself, described the two-fold moral imperative of food banks, stating, “I believe we are morally responsible to provide food to people experiencing hunger today, and I believe we are morally responsible to challenge and change the systems and structures that cause and perpetuate hunger” (Sharon, 2021). When I asked how her own experience with food insecurity impacted her work, she answered:

> I am very much of the belief that we can’t abandon our moral obligation to feed people experiencing hunger today to only focus on the ending hunger work; I believe we need to do both. And our skills were lopsided. Far too much of our assets were being directed towards the first half of our mission, and we’re working first to balance that and then to shift more of our assets towards the second half of the mission, and I'm not quite sure where we’ll land on the division of those assets. But I think my own personal experience will keep a meaningful portion on that feeding people today side. (Sharon, 2021)

Grounded in her own experiences of food insecurity, Sharon highlighted the importance of continuing to meet immediate needs while reorienting much of food banks’ work toward reducing systemic inequities. This focus on systemic change represents a new direction for food banking as a coexistence of both immediate and future-oriented strategies. As powerful organizations, food banks are beginning to play a greater role in advocacy that might address the high degree of systemic inequity in the country. However, food banks are still perpetuating narratives that hunger can be addressed through private, charitable giving and education programs that target people in poverty, which undermine efforts to create systemic change. I

propose several solutions that address hunger both today and tomorrow that emerged during this study.

Potential Solutions for Today and Tomorrow

This dissertation demonstrates that relying on food banks to administer the social safety net leads to a stopgap, patchwork approach to addressing hunger. The resources and programs of food banks vary considerably by location. Furthermore, food bank programs and metrics tend to be targeted at temporarily alleviating hunger rather than ending hunger. Not only is the amount of food and nutritional quality supplied through these stopgap measure not enough, but there is a spatial mismatch between areas of deep need and areas that have the most food bank resources. Central to building a more effective and equitable social safety net is including accountability to ensure that everyone has access to sufficient and appropriate food that enables them to engage in social interactions and cultural traditions. It is also important to shift away from privatized systems toward public systems that are accountable to the people that need their services.

Changing Food Banks Today

As private, charitable organizations, contemporary food banks are influenced more by donors and funders than the people they serve. This was evidenced by how donors influenced food bank programs to focus on populations considered most "deserving" of assistance rather than the populations with the highest rates of food insecurity. Furthermore, food bank administrators reported shifting their political actions to be more politicized and social justice-oriented when they did include people who had experienced hunger in decision-making roles.

To address what it means to end hunger, food banks should shift accountability away from those in power to people who have experienced hunger and poverty. This begins by incorporating client satisfaction as a metric of success, and it moves beyond collecting client's

stories to use during fundraising and political lobbying. Centering on the experiences of people who have experienced hunger means granting them decision-making power throughout the organization, which can include changing the composition of boards and directors and changing hiring practices. People who have experienced hunger should be involved in all forms of decision-making so that food banks are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. When food banks in my interview sample began to center client voices and needs during decision-making, administrators, such as Kim and Sharon (see Chapters 4 and 5), described how they became more focused on equity and involved in advocating for public policies that reduced inequities.

Shifting power relations is one aspect of creating more equitable food banks. I found that food banks are increasingly focusing on what equity looks like in their organizations. However, most conversations are focused on race/ethnicity and class. Other populations that disproportionately experience hunger should not be overlooked. Gender was seldom discussed despite women disproportionately experiencing food insecurity and poverty. LGBTQ+ communities were also rarely mentioned despite having high food insecurity. Food banks should also consider how religious inequities are embedded in private food assistance networks. Most food banks are not religious, but religious organizations comprise the majority of Feeding America partner agencies (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013; Feeding America, 2017). Food banks should pay attention to how their partner agency networks are making food assistance difficult to access for people who are part of religious minorities or not religiously affiliated.

Food banks should recognize and use the considerable influence they have to help reduce inequalities and change the private food assistance system. For example, they have considerable power over partner agencies, which they can use to promote equitable practices, rather than

limiting their focus to food safety guidelines and funders' reporting requirements. Food banks should work toward reducing eligibility requirements, encouraging anti-discrimination training, and other practices that center on client dignity. They can also allocate greater resources to organizations run by people who have experienced hunger and those from groups that experience hunger disproportionately.

Food banks should be more intentional about their resource distribution to attend to geographical inequities in their locations. Food banks are increasingly mapping their distributions and comparing their coverage to demographic data to identify where their locations and distributions do not align with need. Importantly, food bank metrics should include attention to geographic inequities and do so at a more granular level than counties. In working to fill these gaps, food banks should reflect on why these gaps exist and how they might need to not only set up new distributions but also provide funding to under-resourced, grassroots organizations already operating in these -communities. To overcome structural and geographic barriers, food banks need to consider how they are distributing resources to their partner agencies and the barriers that small partner agencies and distant partner agencies have to overcome in transporting food. Some food banks are also overcoming some of these barriers by intentionally locating new warehouses. Food banks and the Feeding America Network might also consider how boundaries between food bank service areas and donor contracts influence partner agencies' access to food, particularly in rural area.

Food banks also have the power to advance food justice, a practice in which they are increasingly involved. They should pay greater attention to how they enact food justice and reflect on their own role in the larger food system. Many food banks are focusing on food justice by implementing vote-with-your-dollar approaches to create an alternative food system through

food purchasing (Baumann et al., 2017; Carfagna et al., 2014; Spagnuolo, 2022). Instead, I believe food banks should prioritize enacting food justice for their clients and introduce systemic changes to the food system they participate in through their distribution of food and other resources. Creating a more just food system could involve granting their clients "buying power," rather than making purchases on their behalf. Administrators should also consider how corporate food actors are using food banks to avoid taxes and improve their public relations and brand reputations (Fisher, 2017a; Haynes Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Riches, 2018). When food banks use their purchasing power to promote people who have been marginalized in the current food system, they might also focus on working conditions in addition to ownership of food production businesses. For example, some administrators described farmworkers' increased vulnerability and how their organizations designed programs to reach them, though systemic changes to farmworker conditions were largely absent from conversations during the interviews. Both in and outside of food banks, the food justice movement should pay more attention to the diverse populations that food injustice impacts most.

Food banks should recognize and use their power to reduce inequality and enact food justice. The administrators I interviewed spoke of how they could inform volunteers better that passing out food does not end hunger. They described how they could better hold politicians accountable, stating that any politician who wants to use them for positive public relations should listen to their lobbying priorities. The administrators also described building political power among the people they serve through grassroots organizing, voter registration, and making food distribution locations double as polling places. If food banks truly intend to end hunger, political power should be used to advance policies that reduce structural inequities.

Building Better Systems for Tomorrow

Despite considerable public attention on the private social safety net, the public safety net is far more effective, even in its current limited form. According to the National Feeding America Organization, SNAP provides nine times as many meals as the Feeding America Network (Feeding America, 2020b).[41] Still, the public social safety net has many limitations and is experienced inequitably (Allard et al., 2022; Brady et al., 2017; Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003; Kelly & Lobao, 2021; Ray et al., 2023). Food banks should use their political power to advocate for policies that reduce barriers to participating in social safety net programs, promoting the right to food, and providing universal support. I found that some food banks were engaged in advocacy for each of these types of policies, but that many food banks could be more active in taking these approaches.

Existing U.S. social safety net programs were intentionally made to be stigmatizing and difficult to access (Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Katz, 2013; Ray et al., 2023). However, policymakers know how to improve them. Many of the food bank administrators I spoke with highlighted that during Covid-19, the government implemented a more effective social safety net quickly through universal stimulus payments, reduced administrative burdens, increased SNAP benefits, eviction moratoria, expanded unemployment benefits, and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) program, which provided parents with cash-like benefits to purchase food while children were out of school. With these programs in effect,

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[41] The vast majority of food bank administrators I interviewed spoke favorably of the SNAP program, except to highlight its insufficiency and eligibility limitations. Only two administrators I interviewed engaged in critiques of SNAP aligned with conservative politics – Dale promoted private solutions (see Chapter 5) and one other administrator critiqued that SNAP can be used on unhealthy food.

annual food insecurity did not rise from 2019 to 2020, despite an economic recession (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021).

The pandemic demonstrated how administrative burdens can be reduced easily. Benefits can be administered automatically through the IRS, rather than requiring lengthy, cumbersome, and stigmatizing applications. The government already has the means to streamline social safety net administration, but welfare reform has led to programs becoming more difficult to access, rather than easier (Dickinson, 2019; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Hays, 2003).

When considering policies that end hunger, other scholars and the United Nations emphasize the importance of considering food as a basic human right (Elver, 2023; Riches, 2018; *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948). While advocacy on the right to food was relatively rare, this moral framing was more common. Seven of the food bank administrators I interviewed spoke of food as a basic human right as they described the moral responsibility of food banks. Shifting food from a charitable handout to a human right allows governments to be held accountable for their failure to ensure a basic standard of living for citizens. A rights-based framing shifts the discussion away from those few who are considered "deserving" of assistance toward all people being recognized. Programs and policies that serve the "deserving poor" undermine the right to food by making access to it conditional on belonging to specific social groups. The right to food is universal and counters rhetoric used to preserve inequities regarding food access. The right to food should be considered alongside other rights to basic necessities, such as housing, clothing, and healthcare.

Hunger is tied to food access, but contemporary hunger in the United States is a byproduct of economic inequality. For this reason, the best anti-hunger policies are anti-poverty policies. This sentiment was echoed by food bank administrators that I interviewed who focused

on systemic root causes of hunger. Food bank administrators emphasized how hunger is a result of poverty and economic insecurity. Advocacy should shift toward cash-based assistance and income-generating policies, which address the underlying cause of poverty rather than treating the symptom. Such policies can include universal basic income, expanded tax credits, and living wage policies. The current social safety net centers on in-kind assistance, since it historically prioritizes agricultural and food system priorities rather than the needs of people who are experiencing hunger. Keith, a Feeding America PDO executive director, emphasized the faults of the current system, saying

> I'd like to back up to that Emergency Food Assistance Program, so I just want to say for the record of it, that's a complete misnomer, right? It's not an emergency food assistance program at all. It's been going on since the 80s. It's dealing with a chronic condition. And it's actually a farm subsidy program, and because there's only so much storage capacity out there, they have to do something with all this surplus food that they're purchasing. (Keith, 2021)

Hunger is a relatively inexpensive issue to address through policies that reduce poverty. Public policies should grant people the agency to select their own food. The National Feeding America Organization estimates that the combined annual budget shortfall for the food budgets of all U.S. households was $21.5 billion in 2021 (Hake et al., 2023). This figure is large, but it is relatively small when considering that this amount could eradicate food insecurity across the country. For comparison, the federal government spent $119.5 billion on just the SNAP program during the 2022 fiscal year (October 2021-Septemeber 2022) (Toossi & Jones, 2023). The amount the National Feeding America Organization estimates is needed to contribute to households is roughly 18% additional spending. Current SNAP administration costs are about 4.4% of SNAP's budget (Toossi & Jones, 2023), so additional administration costs calculated at this rate would cost approximately an additional $1 billion. However, administration costs could

be lowered by expanding eligibility and reducing how frequently beneficiaries must renew their benefits, two barriers the current program experiences in eliminating hunger.

Relying on the current privatized social safety net that centers on distribution of in-kind goods has many shortcomings that reproduce inequities and lead to people falling through both the public and private social safety nets. Systemic inequities that lead to hunger are pervasive, but hunger is an issue that can be solved. U.S. society possesses all the resources and innovations needed to end hunger. The country produces more than enough food to feed everyone, and food is a perishable good that cannot be hoarded indefinitely and retain its value. Ending hunger does not rely on technological advances; it can be ended by redistributing existing resources. Food banks can collectively advocate for the changes necessary to do so, or they can maintain the current system that perpetuates inequities. This research is meant to call attention to the historic context that set food banking on its current ideological, financial, political, and spatial trajectory. The present culmination of this trajectory asks food banks to grapple with external and internal inequalities that haunt American promises to end hunger. They must recognize that there is no neutral action, and so the question of whether they will use their power to promote equity or maintain the current inequitable food system remains unanswered.

Methodological Appendix

Abbreviations

ACS:	American Community Survey
AIC:	Akaike Information Criterion
BIPOC:	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
EIN:	Employer Identification Number
IRS:	Internal Revenue Service
PDO:	Feeding America Partner Distribution Organization
RDO:	Feeding America Redistribution Organization
TEFAP:	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
TSFCA:	Two-Step Floating Catchment Area
USDA:	United States Department of Agriculture

This study uses a mixed methods design, employing geospatial demographic analysis as well as qualitative methods with in-depth interviews and secondary document analysis, a combination that provides a triangulated approach to the study of U.S. food banks. By assessing food banks at the national level across a variety of food bank types, I am able to draw conclusions that extend beyond the individual food bank level. I provide more context on how data were collected and analyzed below.

Qualitative Methods

This study represents an important contribution to extant sociological literature by using interviews and archival materials to examine a national sample of U.S. food banks that included both Feeding America and independent organizations. Interviews were supplemented with

material from food banks' websites, trade organizations, and news articles. This combination allowed exploration of both food bank administrators' discourse and their organizations' public-facing images.

Interviews

I conducted 62 in-depth, semi-structured interviews among food bank administrators, focusing on respondents' roles, programs and practices, social issues regarding food banking, organizational impacts of contemporary politics and government policies, approaches to addressing hunger, measurement of success, resource allocation, decision-making, organizational affiliations, and experiences with the pandemic and natural disasters.

Interviewees were recruited using both purposive and snowball sampling. I recruited respondents who held leadership positions since they have expertise in the field, oversee operations, and lead decision-making at their organizations. To select a diverse sample, I purposively recruited respondents from across regions whose organizations varied according to size, type, and affiliation with Feeding America. I asked interviewees to recommend other people they thought I should speak with both in or outside of their organization. Occasionally, I identified gaps that needed to be filled in the purposive sampling. Nonprofit websites commonly publish the names of organizational administrators, which I used to identify potential interviewees. Contact information for potential interviewees was found through web searches, telephone calls to food banks, and referrals. Of the people and organizations contacted, 59% agreed to participate in the interviews. Interviewees were largely privileged in terms of race, income, education, and sexuality (Table A.1), which appeared to reflect general trends in food bank administrators.

Interviews were conducted from March 2021 to October 2022 over Zoom due to public health risks of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since they were conducted among working professionals a year into the pandemic that led to the technology's widespread adoption, interviewees appeared familiar and comfortable with using Zoom. Internet quality varied, though access to the internet was not expected to be a limitation for participants because the study population was professional administrators in food banking. Conducting interviews over Zoom also allowed this study to include respondents from more diverse locations due to budget constraints.

Most interviews lasted approximately one hour, with durations ranging from 40 to 93 minutes. I refer to the entire sample of interviewees as food bank administrators (N=62), signifying their role in decision-making in their field. Most interviewees were employed as presidents, CEOs, or executive directors (n=39). To maintain confidentiality, I collapsed job titles into several categories—CEO (n=22), executive director (n=17), manager (n=5), vice president (n=6), director (n=10), expert (n=1), and specialist (n=1). [42] Most interviewees (n=51) worked at food banks, but I also interviewed people at food bank associations (n=6) and other nonprofit organizations in the food bank industry (n=5). Interviewees verbally completed demographic questions at the end of the interview, or responded to a Qualtrics survey with demographic questions (Table A.1). Some did not provide complete demographic information.

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[42] All respondents whose role was CEO, president and CEO, or president are referred to as CEOs. I maintained the separate category of executive director, which refers to people in the top position at their organization but seems to associate with a slightly less corporate nonprofit environment. I classified people who are the leading staff person overseeing a food bank hosted at broader nonprofits, such as Community Action Agencies, as managers. Interviewees who were vice presidents or in c-level positions other than CEO, such as chief operating officers, chief financial officers, or chief program officers, were denoted vice presidents. People in other roles were denoted by their title, such as director or specialist, but I omitted an organization's focus of the role, (e.g. advocacy director was classified as director.)

When possible, I used publicly available information (e.g., bios on food bank websites) to supplement missing demographics.

At most organizations, I interviewed only one person because I found that subsequent interviews resulted in saturation. In total, I interviewed people from 56 organizations (Table A.2). I collected interviews until saturation was reached (Small, 2009). Due to referrals and lack of a comprehensive list of food banks, I overrepresented larger food banks and those peers believed were progressive or important for benchmarking.

Archival Materials

I collected archival material from food banks' websites and web searches on food banks. Throughout the study, I followed mainstream news articles on food banking and a trade publication (i.e., *Food Bank News*). During interviewee recruitment, I collected information about participants' organizations from their websites, social media presences, and recent news articles, both national and local, that featured their organizations. This information was used to contextualize and prompt interviews. During data analysis, I conducted web searches on topics that arose during the interviews to supplement interviews and include additional organizations that were not represented in my sample. I also drew from IRS tax-exempt organization Form 990 filings from 2021 to obtain additional information on organizations included in my sample, including missions, annual revenue, and administrator salaries.[43] I also collected revenues from 2019.

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[43] When data were missing, 2021 data were supplemented with IRS data from 2020 and 2022, and with data from organizational websites.

Qualitative Analysis

I wrote memos after the interviews on themes that emerged from them. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by undergraduate research assistants and a professional transcription service. I used MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to code and analyze interview transcripts and archival materials iteratively using open and focused coding processes.

Ethics

The University of California, Davis IRB approved this study. All interviewees were provided with a detailed consent form, and verbal consent was obtained before the start of each interview. To maintain interviewee confidentiality, I provide only limited information on participants' demographics and organizations by using pseudonyms (Table A.3). I stripped identifying information (e.g., place and program names) from quotes, which is represented by ellipses or a bracketed generalized note of what an interviewee was referencing. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. When I refer to organizations or a person by both first and last names, the information comes from publicly available, cited information that was part of archival materials. Real names of organizations and people are used only when I draw from public information from archival material, which included a broader sample of organizations than my interview sample.

Geospatial Methods

Using spatial regression analysis to examine the accessibility of food bank resources, I assess the relationship between the accessibility of food banks and county demographics. To do so, I combine a custom database, designed to be a comprehensive dataset of food banks that

serve nine states, with IRS information on tax-exempt nonprofits and data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS).

Case Selection of States

Case selection strategy included a purposive sample of U.S. states, in which I included states to obtain diversity across regions, poverty, and racial demographics. To the extent possible, I geographically cluster states to reduce border effects, since some food banks work across state borders. I constructed a dataset of food banks that captured every food bank that operated in that state, creating a food bank census. I therefore limited cases to the nine states of Alaska, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas (Table A.4). These states are located in three Census regions: the Midwest, South, and West. Two states had poverty levels from 10% to 11.9%, four from 12% to 14.9%, and three were over 15%. The national poverty rate during this study's period was 12.5%. In two states, the percentage of the population that was BIPOC was less than 40%. In four states, 40% to 60% of the state's population was BIPOC, and in three states it was more than 60%. The national percentage of the population that was BIPOC during this period was 41.1%. These nine states comprised more than one-quarter of the total U.S. population.

Food Bank Database

I constructed a database of food banks at the state level. National information on food banks is reported by Feeding America, which does not reflect the many food banks that operate outside of the Feeding America network. No comprehensive list of food banks in the United States exists (Bouek, 2018a), so I constructed a food bank census in the nine states that contains information on locations, affiliations, and characteristics. Undergraduate research assistants assisted in the construction of these databases.

Potential food banks were identified through web searches of Feeding America, state government food bank lists, regional food bank associations, the IRS Tax Exempt Organization Database, *Food Bank News,* and Google searches. Resulting organizations were added to a list, excepting those whose IRS status had been auto-revoked due to 3 or more years of inactivity. The organizations were then assessed for whether they met the operationalized definition of a food bank using their websites, news articles, and occasionally contacting them directly by phone or email. I defined a food bank as a:

> Private, charitable organization that collects food and then redistributes the food it collects to other charitable organizations and programs (including food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters); however, it may also directly distribute food to people in need of food assistance. In order to be classified as a food bank, the organization must supply food to at least one other organization. It must provide food intended for human consumption. The food bank must distribute food that is intended to be consumed by people in the United States. Organizations that are primarily mobile networks of food rescue are not included.

This definition was informed by Poppendieck (1998), Cotugna and Dobbe Beebe (2002), and Lambie-Mumford and Dowler (2015), focusing on use of the term in the United States. I adjusted the definition to account for unanticipated cases (e.g., pet food banks) that arose during preliminary testing of the definition. For organizations that fit the definition, I recorded for each:

- Food bank name
- IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- Address
- Affiliation with Feeding America and other food bank organizations
- Relationships with other food banks
- The source through which the food bank was found
- County (Parishes for Louisiana)
- Service area
- Number of nonprofit partner agencies
- Whether they distribute TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program)
- Founding year
- Year of most recent move
- Whether the food bank has multiple locations

Addresses were used to geocode the food banks in Geocodio. The EIN was used to match food banks with budget information from recent publicly available IRS 990 forms.

The food bank data required little cleaning, most of which involved changing variable names to shorten them and removal of others I did not need for analysis. For analysis of food bank descriptive statistics (that were not spatial), I eliminated duplicate listings of the same organization, which occurred when they had multiple locations. I did not use imputed information for descriptive statistics. For geospatial analysis, I weighted the food banks' resources (i.e., revenue, income, assets, and number of partners) by number of locations so that the resources were not counted more than once. There was likely some error introduced in these approximations, since all food bank locations in the same organization might not be equal distributors of resources. I adjusted these weights only in the cases of Midwest Food Bank and Feed the Children, the two largest food banks in the United States, which serve food nationally under one EIN but that had only one location in the food bank census. For these two food banks, I adjusted weights to account for the number of other locations outside of the food bank census.

Internal Revenue Service Data

For IRS data on organizations' financial information, I used the IRS's Exempt Organizations Business Master File Extract (EO BMF). Those data give access to several variables of interest, including an organization's EIN and the month and year of its most recently filed tax period, and its legal name, income, revenue, and assets in this most recent filing. IRS revenue includes donations of in-kind goods, such as food, in addition to monetary revenue. Thus, donated food is represented in a food bank's revenue. Since a census is important for

measures of spatial accessibility, I filled in missing data from other sources or through multiple imputation.

Food bank resources are based on the IRS's 13 February 2024 release of the EO BMF, which includes tax returns for organizations in the food bank census for tax periods ending June 2021 to June 2023, with 75% of documents being from tax periods ending June 2022 or later. The file is cumulative and reflects the most recent information on file with the IRS at the time of download. When IRS data were missing, or when revenue was reported as zero, I searched for older IRS files and publicly available financial audits.[44] Financial information could not be found for three food banks—Salvation Army Modesto Citadel (CA), The Willows Food Bank (CA), and Hope for the City (NV). For these three, I used multivariate imputation by chained equations to estimate revenue. Imputed revenues were included in all spatial analyses, but they were not included in descriptive statistics on food banks across types of organizations. I imputed their logged revenue using the "mice" package in R based on several variables, including state, relationship with Feeding America, the log of their weighted partners, whether they distribute the TEFAP program, and number of locations. I converted logged revenues back into revenue, and checked imputed values using comparisons with other food banks, which appeared reasonable regarding my estimation of their size based on number of partner agencies and how many pounds of food one food bank reported it distributed in comparison to other food banks with similar

[44] For three food banks, I could locate data only from older tax returns—Shasta Senior Nutrition Program/Dignity Health Connected Living (California), June 2017; The Community Pantry (New Mexico), December 2019; and Food for Families–Bullhead City Food Bank (based in Arizona but serving in California and Nevada), December 2019.

revenue. I did not impute any other variables.[45] I matched IRS data with food bank data using EINs.

USDA and Census Bureau Data

I used data from the U.S. Census Bureau to define geographic areas and determine demographics for those areas. I also used the USDA's 2023 Rural-Urban Continuum code to create a binary variable that indicated urban and rural areas (USDA, 2024b). After examining food bank revenue in relation to these codes, I chose to binarize them into urban and rural areas, because the continuum measured distance to a metropolitan area, which created a non-linear relationship regarding food bank resources.

I used U.S. Census data for both geographical shapes (states and counties) and demographic information in them. I used 5-year ACS estimates from 2018 to 2022 to determine population characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, proportions of the population that were experiencing poverty and near-poverty, and total population. I use 5-year estimates because they are available for all counties, even those with populations under 20,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Additionally, 5 -year estimates reduce margins of error compared with 1-year and 3-year estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). I analyzed counties because that is the level at which many food banks designate their service areas and measure food distribution. County equivalents were used for Alaska and Louisiana since they do not have counties.

I accessed U.S. Census data using the "tidycensus" and "tigris" libraries in R. In addition to adding information on census geographies, I also used these packages to access ACS data

[45] I imputed rather than drop cases or input medians because dropping cases would lead to false holes in the network, and substituting median values might skew access because these tended to be smaller or larger food banks.

estimates for the five-year period from 2018 to 2022 at county, state, and national levels, and I added information on the total population living in those area. For race, I added counts of people who are White alone, Black or African American alone, American Indian and Alaska Native alone, Asian alone, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, some other race alone, two or more races, Hispanic or Latino, and the corresponding total population for this variable. I then aggregated these data and converted them into percent non-Hispanic White, percent BIPOC, percent non-Hispanic Asian and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, percent non-Hispanic Black, percent non-Hispanic other or more than one race, and percent Hispanic. Percent BIPOC includes ACS estimates for the percent of the population that identified as Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, some other race, or more than one race. I also added count data for the number of people in various ratios of the poverty line for under 0.5, 0.5 to 0.99, 1.00 to 1.24, 1.25 to 1.49, 1.50 to 1.84, 1.85 to 1.99, 2.00 and over, and corresponding total data for this variable. I then aggregated and converted these into variables for percent below the poverty line and percent below 185% of the poverty line. I reprojected the data first into WGS84 and then UTM zone 11N. For some maps, I also reprojected data such that Alaska and Hawaii were rescaled and moved closer to the continental United States using the "shift_geometry()" function in the "tigris" package.

Geospatial Data Analysis

I analyzed these data using a combination of descriptive statistics and maps, spatial accessibility measures, and spatial regression analysis. I used R to conduct the quantitative analysis. Drawing from the food bank census, in combination with IRS and ACS demographic data, I calculated descriptive statistics and created maps to contextualize U.S. food banks, their

resources, and their geographical distribution, represented in a combination of tables, graphs, and maps. I examined spatial accessibility using buffer analysis and a two-step floating catchment area (TSFCA). I used the spatial buffers of county centroids, calculated using "st_centroid." For revenue measures, I used weighted revenue so that it was divided equally among food banks with multiple locations.

During buffer analysis, I created buffer polygons that were 100-mile Euclidean circles from county centroids. I used 100 miles because it roughly represented a 2-hour drive, or 4-hour round trip. I found the number of food banks in the buffer and how much food bank revenue was within it. The buffer analysis matched most closely with Waity (2016) and Bacon and Baker (2017), though I used a larger buffer because food banks operate at a different scale than food pantries.

I determined that the two-step floating catchment area (TSFCA) is the best measure of spatial accessibility of food bank resources, given its ability to capture distance, supply of resources, and demand for resources in a single measure. I used TSFCA to measure spatial accessibility using the "ac" package in R. I created TSFCA scores using the same 100 mile distance used during the buffer analysis. For the demand measure, I used the total population in a county, and for the supply measure, I used a food bank's weighted revenue. This measure aligns with methods other researchers use to address similar questions regarding organizational accessibility (Allard, 2009; Roubenoff et al., 2023).

Regression Analysis

Using the TSFCA spatial accessibility measure as a dependent variable, I constructed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models and spatial error models (SEM) to test relationships between regional demographic characteristics and food bank accessibility. Building

on extant research, I included race, poverty, and rurality in the models. Each variable has been included in extant studies that tested accessibility to food assistance and social service nonprofits, but all three have not been included in the same study (Allard, 2009; Bacon & Baker, 2017; Waity, 2016). Since other studies found these variables to be statistically significant and have interaction effects (Allard, 2009; Bacon & Baker, 2017; Waity, 2016), I constructed additional models to test for interaction effects when all three variables were included during the same analysis.

I conducted exploratory data analysis and exploratory spatial analysis to examine variables and relationships between them. I also mapped variables to assess whether they were distributed spatially, and I mapped some OLS residuals. I tested for autocorrelation using the global Moran's I, finding positive spatial autocorrelation in both the dependent variable and residuals. From this point forward, the dependent variable is the TSFCA spatial accessibility score for a county with the 100-mile buffer, which I call food bank access. Food bank access was not normally distributed. I tried to log transform food bank access, but it did not improve normality, so I used regression with the original food bank access measure.

I constructed OLS regression models and SEMs with corresponding variables. I did not construct a spatial lag model since a county's access to food bank resources being influenced by its neighbors' access was not theoretically meaningful. Instead, I wanted to control for autocorrelation of the errors. I compared models using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Lagrange multiplier tests (Anselin et al., 1996; Getis, 2010).

I included several independent variables during analyses, including each combination of interaction effects, and I selected these variables based on findings in extant literature. To measure race, I used the percentage of a county that was BIPOC. I originally tested a more

nuanced measure of race, but it did not provide better fit. I used a binary measure of urban versus rural counties. I measured need using the percentage of the population within 185% of the poverty line. I used this measure instead of the percentage below poverty because many people still experience food insecurity well over the poverty line. For the SEMs, I used Queen contiguity to measure neighbors. A distance-based approach seemed the most theoretically relevant, but I was concerned about issues with specifying a distance that would apply across states.

Table A.1

Interview Sample Individual-Level Demographics

	Count	Percent
Gender (n=62)		
Men	34	55%
Women	28	45%
Race/Ethnicity (n=51)		
White	46	90%
Hispanic, Latinx, or Chicanx	4	8%
Native American, American Indian, Alaska Native, and/or Native Hawaiian	7	14%
Black or African American	2	4%
Asian	1	2%
Other	1	2%
Multiple Races and/or Ethnicities [a]	8	16%
Highest Education Level (n=61)		
High School Diploma	1	2%
Some College	4	7%
Bachelor's Degree/Four year college or university	23	38%
Some Graduate Education	2	3%
Postgraduate or Professional Degree	31	51%
Sexual Orientation (n=50)		
Heterosexual/Straight	44	88%
Gay/Lesbian	3	6%
Bisexual	3	6%
Religion (n=50)		
Christian (including Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Quaker)	27	54%
Agnostic/Atheist/None [b]	23	46%
Median Total Annual Compensation (n=42)	$163,000	
Median Age (n=52)	50 to 59	
Total (N=62)		**100%**

[a] Seven people reported two races/ethnicities and one person reported four.

[b] The agnostic/atheist/none religion category also includes people who reported “Don't know,” “Not affiliated,” “Nothing in particular,” or “Unaffiliated.” One person reported “Post-Christian.”

Table A.2

Interview Sample Organization-Level Demographics

	Count/Median	Percent
Organizational Type (n=56)		
Food Banks	47	84%
Food Bank Associations	5	9%
Other Nonprofits	4	7%
Affiliation (n=56)		
Independent	17	30%
Christian Affiliated	7	13%
Feeding America	39	70%
Feeding America Member	*27*	*48%*
Feeding America PDO/RDO	7	13%
Feeding America Association	5	9%
Region (n=56)		
National	3	5%
Midwest	11	20%
Northeast	3	5%
South	11	20%
West	28	50%
Median Annual Revenue 2019 (n=52)	$44,000,000	
Median Annual Revenue 2021 (n=52)	$75,000,000	
Combined Annual Revenue 2019 (n=52)	$5,900,000,000	
Combined Annual Revenue 2021 (n=52)	$9,400,000,000	

Table A.3

Pseudonym Key

Pseudonym	Organization Type	Role	Year
Aaron	Food Bank Association	Director	2021
Adam	Food Bank Association	Executive Director	2021
Andrea	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2022
Anthony	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
April	Independent Food Bank	Manager	2022
Ashley	Independent Food Bank	Manager	2022
Barbara	Other Nonprofit	Executive Director	2021
Ben	Feeding America Partner Agency	Executive Director	2022
Brandon	Independent Food Bank	Vice President	2022
Brenda	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Charles	Independent Food Bank	CEO	2021
Cheryl	Feeding America Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Cody	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Director	2021
Courtney	Food Bank Association	Director	2021
Craig	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Crystal	Feeding America Food Bank	Specialist	2021
Curtis	Feeding America Food Bank	Vice President	2021
Cynthia	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Dale	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2022
Debra	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Denise	Food Bank Association	Vice President	2022
Frank	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Gabe	Independent Food Bank	Director	2022
George	Independent Food Bank	Director	2021
Greg	Feeding America Food Bank	Director	2021
Heather	Feeding America Food Bank	Vice President	2021
Hector	Independent Food Bank	Director	2022
Janice	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Jennifer	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Jerry	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Joan	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Justin	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Keith	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Kevin	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Kim	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Lauren	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Lawrence	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Liz	Food Bank Association	Director	2022
Mariah	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Director	2021
Mary	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Megan	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Manager	2022
Nathan	Other Nonprofit	Executive Director	2021
Nick	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Manager	2021
Patricia	Feeding America PDO Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Randy	Feeding America Food Bank	Executive Director	2021
Raymond	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Rodney	Food Bank Association	Director	2022
Ron	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Sandra	Other Nonprofit	Executive Director	2021
Scott	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Sharon	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Shawn	Independent Food Bank	CEO	2021
Stacy	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2022
Terry	Independent Food Bank	Manager	2021
Tiffany	Feeding America Food Bank	Vice President	2022
Todd	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2022
Tracy	Feeding America Food Bank	Vice President	2021
Travis	Independent Food Bank	Executive Director	2022
Troy	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021
Victor	Independent Food Bank	CEO	2021
Wendy	Food Bank Sector	Expert	2022
William	Feeding America Food Bank	CEO	2021

Table A.4

Selected States' Characteristics from 2018–2022—ACS 5-Year Estimates

	Percent in Poverty	Percent Near Poverty (185%)	Percent BIPOC	Total Population	Percent of Total U.S. Population
Alaska	10.5%	22.7%	41.6%	734,821	0.2%
California	12.1%	25.6%	64.8%	39,356,104	11.9%
Hawaii	9.6%	20.1%	79.0%	1,450,589	0.4%
Louisiana	18.7%	35.1%	42.5%	4,640,546	1.4%
Missouri	12.8%	27.4%	22.4%	6,154,422	1.9%
Nevada	12.7%	27.8%	53.6%	3,104,817	0.9%
New Mexico	18.3%	35.9%	64.4%	2,112,463	0.6%
Oklahoma	15.2%	32.2%	36.3%	3,970,497	1.2%
Texas	13.9%	29.5%	59.9%	29,243,342	8.8%
Nine Selected States	**13.8%**	**28.5%**	**51.6%**	**90,767,601**	**27.4%**
Entire U.S.	**12.5%**	**26.2%**	**41.1%**	**331,097,593**	**100.0%**

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