

“Cause they’re afraid that they’re going to run out of food:” how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted one food system in rural Appalachia

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of rural food systems, particularly those with limited food access and bleak resource allocation. These challenges were exacerbated by geographic isolation, persistent poverty, and economic decline in certain regions of the U.S., including parts of rural Appalachia. We seek to understand community responses to address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

1. Five focus groups were conducted in spring 2021 to gain an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted ability to access food in one rural Appalachian county.
2. Researchers used an iterative inductive-deductive approach to identify themes and interpret patterns in the data.

RESULTS

- Shifts in food sourcing behaviors, including unique food sharing networks, due to a fear of not having enough food
- Adapted grocery shopping practices to include online ordering and pick-up
- Swings in food pantry utilization from onset of the pandemic and following additional federal pandemic assistance
- Expanded opportunities for home gardening in partnership with Grow Appalachia

The broader food system in rural Appalachia encompasses unique sharing networks, non-traditional partners, and community services representative of regional culture that address food access needs in unprecedented circumstances.

“I know a lot of people that said ‘okay, this could be serious I’m going to really take this garden serious’, and ‘I’m going to really put everything away that I can’. And they share too, but I’m just saying I just think that a lot of people kind of kicked it up a notch, I know I did you know. I put away everything that I could that you know, probably more though, probably more than I had ever done.”

"They have a whole lot more **ordering online**, pickup, instead of going in. **And they bought large quantity at a time.** I don't know how that works because I'm just single. I know **people go and load their trucks up.**"

"We have a home garden. It's about a quarter of an acre and you know it's big for us and um we got all of our produce from the Extension Office and we, you know we tally all that up for the agent. **We seem to do well with it. I mean we can, we freeze. It's a big garden for us. we share, we share, but we don't sell...with neighbors, family.**"

Characteristic	Among All Participants (n=59)
Age (median)	57 years
Female	44 (75%)
White	59 (100%)
Education	
HS grad/GED	24 (41%)
College grad	17 (29%)
Household income	
≤\$20K	21 (36%)
≥\$50K	16 (30%)
Nutrition assistance	
SNAP	15 (25%)
Food pantries	8 (14%)
No assistance	29(49%)

DISCUSSION

The effects of COVID-19 were felt, but this resilient Appalachian community adapted to access healthy food through unique community-based networks. Food pantries remained a key resource among those experiencing food insecurity. Online grocery ordering to neighboring counties became more common and is likely to continue as prominent grocers in the region include the service and accept multiple forms of payment, including SNAP EBT cards. Adults in this community returned to gardening, characteristic of the fabric and history of Appalachian culture. Increased investment, education, and technical assistance provided through programs like Cooperative Extension and Grow Appalachia will support continued home gardening.



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