



Original Research Article

COVID-19: First wave impacts on the Charitable Food Sector in Manitoba, Canada

Joyce Slater,^{a*} Natalie Riediger,^b Bhanu Pilli,^c Kelsey Mann,^d Hannah Derksen,^e Avery L. Penner,^f and Chantal Perchotte^g

^a University of Manitoba; ORCID: [0000-0003-1881-0004](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1881-0004), ^b University of Manitoba; ORCID: [0000-0002-8736-9446](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8736-9446)

^c University of Manitoba; ORCID: [0000-0003-1760-1980](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1760-1980), ^d University of Manitoba, ^e University of Manitoba,

^f University of Manitoba; ORCID: [0000-0002-2527-7407](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2527-7407), ^g University of Manitoba

Abstract

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant socioeconomic changes in Canada due to business and school closures, and related job losses. This increased food insecurity among vulnerable populations, as well as many who had not been previously food insecure, placing unprecedented demand on charitable food organizations. This study documented the pandemic's impact on charitable food organizations in Manitoba, Canada during the first wave in spring 2020. Using a multi-method design, data on pandemic-related program challenges and newly implemented policies/procedures were collected from: food bank organization websites and Facebook pages; online news media outlets; and semi-structured interviews with food organization leadership. Inductive

thematic analysis was used to identify emerging patterns and themes. Second level coding was used to integrate data from different sources. Six challenge themes emerged: *increased need for services; acquisition and distribution of food supply; staff and volunteer resource management; emotional vulnerability of staff, volunteers, and clients; difficulties with internal and external communications; and lack of structural supports*. Five policy/procedure themes emerged: *program and service delivery changes; finance and administrative changes; safety protocols; advocacy for resources and community engagement; and changes to paid and volunteer staffing*. The first wave of COVID-19 had a significant impact on the Manitoba charitable food sector. Food banks re-configured programs

*Corresponding author: Joyce.Slater@umanitoba.ca

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to meet client needs amid shifting public health directives, with diminished resources, rising demand, and insufficient government support. Despite the

resiliency of community food organizations during the pandemic, the status quo with respect to addressing food insecurity is inefficient and inadequate.

Résumé

La première vague de la pandémie de COVID-19 a mené à des changements socioéconomiques considérables au Canada en raison des fermetures de commerces et d'écoles et des pertes d'emplois concomitantes. Cela a augmenté l'insécurité alimentaire pour les populations vulnérables ainsi que pour plusieurs personnes qui n'avaient jamais été dans cette situation auparavant. La demande auprès des organismes d'aide alimentaire en a été sans précédent. Cette étude a documenté l'effet de la pandémie sur les organismes d'aide alimentaire au Manitoba, Canada, durant la première vague, au printemps 2020. À l'aide d'une méthode multiple, les données sur les défis des programmes liés à la pandémie et les nouvelles stratégies et procédures mises en place ont été collectées à partir des sites Web et des pages Facebook des banques alimentaires, des sorties dans les nouvelles des médias en ligne et des entretiens semi-structurés avec des responsables d'organismes alimentaires. L'analyse inductive thématique a été utilisée pour repérer les tendances et les thèmes récurrents. Le codage de second niveau a été utilisé pour intégrer des informations de différentes sources. Six motifs de défi en sont ressortis : *l'accroissement des besoins vis-à-vis des services; l'acquisition et la distribution des denrées; la gestion du personnel et des bénévoles, la vulnérabilité émotionnelle*

du personnel, des bénévoles et de la clientèle; les difficultés de communication interne et externe; et le manque de soutien structurel. Cinq thèmes concernant les stratégies et les procédures ont aussi émergé : *les changements dans les programmes et les services de livraison; les changements sur les plans administratifs et financiers; les protocoles de sécurité; la revendication de ressources et l'appel à l'engagement de la communauté; et les changements sur le plan du travail payé et bénévole.* La première vague de COVID-19 a eu un effet important dans le secteur alimentaire caritatif. Les banques alimentaires ont reconçu leurs programmes pour répondre aux besoins de leur clientèle tout en s'adaptant aux directives changeantes de la santé publique, et ce, avec des ressources réduites, une demande accrue et un soutien gouvernemental insuffisant. Bien que les organismes communautaires à vocation alimentaire aient fait preuve de résilience durant la pandémie, en matière de gestion de l'insécurité alimentaire, le statu quo est inefficace et inadéquat.

Keywords: COVID; pandemic; charitable food; food security; food banks

Introduction

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. This coincided with the advent of the first wave in Canada, which peaked mid-April 2020 (Government of Canada, 2021b). Swift public health responses, including lockdowns (for example, business and school suspensions and closures), physical distancing, and other measures were introduced to mitigate the spread of the virus during the first wave (Canadian Public Health Association, 2021), triggering unprecedented social and economic upheaval. Between February and April, Canada's unemployment rate more than doubled to 14%. Labour force participation fell to 60% over the same period, indicating not only mass job loss (primarily in the hospitality, service, and retail sectors), but also thousands of workers who stopped their search for employment (Beland, Brodeur, Mikola, & Wright, 2020b).

These measures, along with public fear and anxiety, led to significant, rapid changes in food acquisition and distribution patterns. Two main trends emerged: first, grocers saw a marked increase in the purchase of food staples (for example, rice, pasta, canned foods) and other items (for example, toilet paper, cleaning products), as some consumers who could afford to do so stockpiled provisions (Statistics Canada, 2020a). Despite governments advising against these practices, the sight of empty store shelves because of supply chain disruptions sparked alarm (Moran, 2020). At the same time, Charitable Food Organizations (CFOs), such as food banks and meal programs (“soup kitchens,” for example), were impacted through increased demand from the newly unemployed as well as vulnerable families whose children were no longer receiving meals/snacks at school once schools closed (Annable, 2020).

Despite Canada's food wealth, many citizens face financial challenges in accessing food. Between 2017 and 2018, 12% of Canadian households were considered food insecure, having “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints” (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Food insecurity negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health, thereby increasing healthcare costs (Men, Gundersen, Urquia, & Tarasuk, 2020). Vulnerable groups include low-income and single-parent households, renters, northern communities, Indigenous and Black Canadians, and newcomers (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Notably, many of the same populations have been found to be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (Statistics Canada, 2020c, 2021). Despite systemic risk for food insecurity, Canada's response has been largely marshalled from a patchwork of services from the charitable sector, in the form of food banks, soup kitchens, and community/school-based meal/snack programs. Consequently, most CFOs rely heavily on donations from consumers; organizations and businesses (food hamper drives and money); and food and other corporations (surplus or unsellable food stocks; tax credits). CFOs represent a continuum of responses to food insecurity in Canada. Some organizations are heavily reliant on corporate charity, which is arguably highly beneficial to corporations in terms of tax breaks and image, and which may obscure problematic labour practices (Mendly-Zambo, Raphael, & Taman, 2021; Riches, 2018). Others are more grassroots, such as Mutual Aid organizations, which rely on more community-based responses (Bettens, 2020; Guthrie, 2020). Other CFOs are somewhere in between, and some engage in advocacy to address systemic causes of food insecurity (Food Banks Canada, 2019; Harvest Manitoba, 2021). Whatever the source of financial and other resources, this dominant charitable model is

considered a woefully inadequate response to growing food insecurity in Canada (Riches, 2018). Nonetheless, given the lack of structural supports to ensure food security for all, these organizations must be considered key players in the emergency response to COVID.

Donations to CFOs, and their ability to purchase food, are sensitive to external market factors, such as food prices and economic uncertainty, the latter of which has been abundant during the COVID-19 pandemic (Beland, Brodeur, Mikola, & Wright, 2020a; Tarasuk et al., 2014; The Canadian Press, 2016). This is expected to create a vicious cycle, whereby charitable food demand increases as potential donors shift to becoming needy recipients, further reducing food and monetary donations. Additional challenges related to anxiety about, and risk of, contagion and “social distancing” also impact staff, volunteer labour, and programming. This was especially prevalent during the first wave, when COVID-19 transmission dynamics were uncertain (Merow & Urban, 2020). During this period, food banks continued to rely on web and social media platforms to communicate the rapidly evolving changes with their respective communities (Immel, Sipos, Khan, & Errett, 2021).

While food products and packaging were eventually deemed to be unlikely sources of viral transmission (Government of Canada, 2021a), the increased need for charitable food underscores the importance of organizations, such as food banks, as both potential areas of contagion and essential services for growing numbers of Canadians during the pandemic. Food Banks Canada

found a significant increase in visits during the spring of 2020, with one quarter of food banks seeing an increase of 25% in March, compared to 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2020). Major food banks in Ontario and Manitoba reported significant and unprecedented usage during this period (Daily Bread Food Bank & North York Harvest Food Bank, 2021; King & Stewart, 2020). However, how CFOs responded to the pandemic remains unexamined in Canada, to our knowledge. Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine the impact of COVID-19 on CFOs and their organizational responses. For this research CFOs were deemed non-government charitable organizations with a mission to provide food and/or meals to citizens in need, either directly or through a network of agencies, through food banks or other initiatives such as meal programs (for example, soup kitchens). Distinctions were not made between those organizations receiving corporate donations and those reliant solely on community-based resources, or a combination thereof.

Using news media articles, CFO communications (websites and Facebook), and key informant interviews, we sought to do the following: 1) identify the challenges encountered by the charitable food sector during the first wave of the pandemic; and 2) document the policies/procedures *newly* implemented in the charitable food sector in response to these challenges.

Methods

Design

The study employed a multi-method qualitative design (Bryman, 2004). Data was collected from three sources: 1) organizational communications (websites and Facebook posts); 2) news media articles; and 3) key informants (CFO management). A multi-method design was chosen as a means of contextualizing data derived from the interviews with the larger dataset from media sources. This provides a richer, more trustworthy dataset, which allowed the researchers a more in-depth immersion in the topic (Roller, 2016). Analysis was shaped by the policy analysis framework developed by the National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy (National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2010) to document challenges that arose for organizations and their programming, and

corresponding policy/procedural responses to the pandemic. Data were collected concurrently.

Data collection

Organizational communications

We conducted a search for organization communications related to COVID-19 between March 9 and June 5, 2020, using websites and Facebook pages. Organizations were included if they met the following criteria: national umbrella organization supporting food banks; a provincial or territory-level food bank organization; a Manitoba-specific local or regional food bank; and a website or Facebook page with COVID-19-specific communication (Table 1).

Table 1: Food bank websites and Facebook pages included in data collection, by region.

Region	National Food Bank Supporting Organization (n = 1)	Provincial or Territory-level Food Bank Organization (n = 8)	Local or Regional Food Bank Organization (n = 12)
Canada	1		
Atlantic Provinces		1	1
Quebec, Ontario		2	3
Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan		2	3
Manitoba		1	5
Northwest Territories		2	

News media

We conducted a systematic search for news media articles related to the charitable food sector and COVID-19 from CBC News, CTV News, Global News, *The Globe and Mail*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press* between March 9 and June 5, 2020. These sites were included because of a national presence and their

public availability, with the exception of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, which was included to provide a more local perspective as it is Manitoba’s main daily newspaper. We obtained a subscription for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Each website was scanned daily from March 9, 2020 to March 29, 2020, then twice a week during the rest of the data collection phase. The main page of the website was first examined for articles relating to

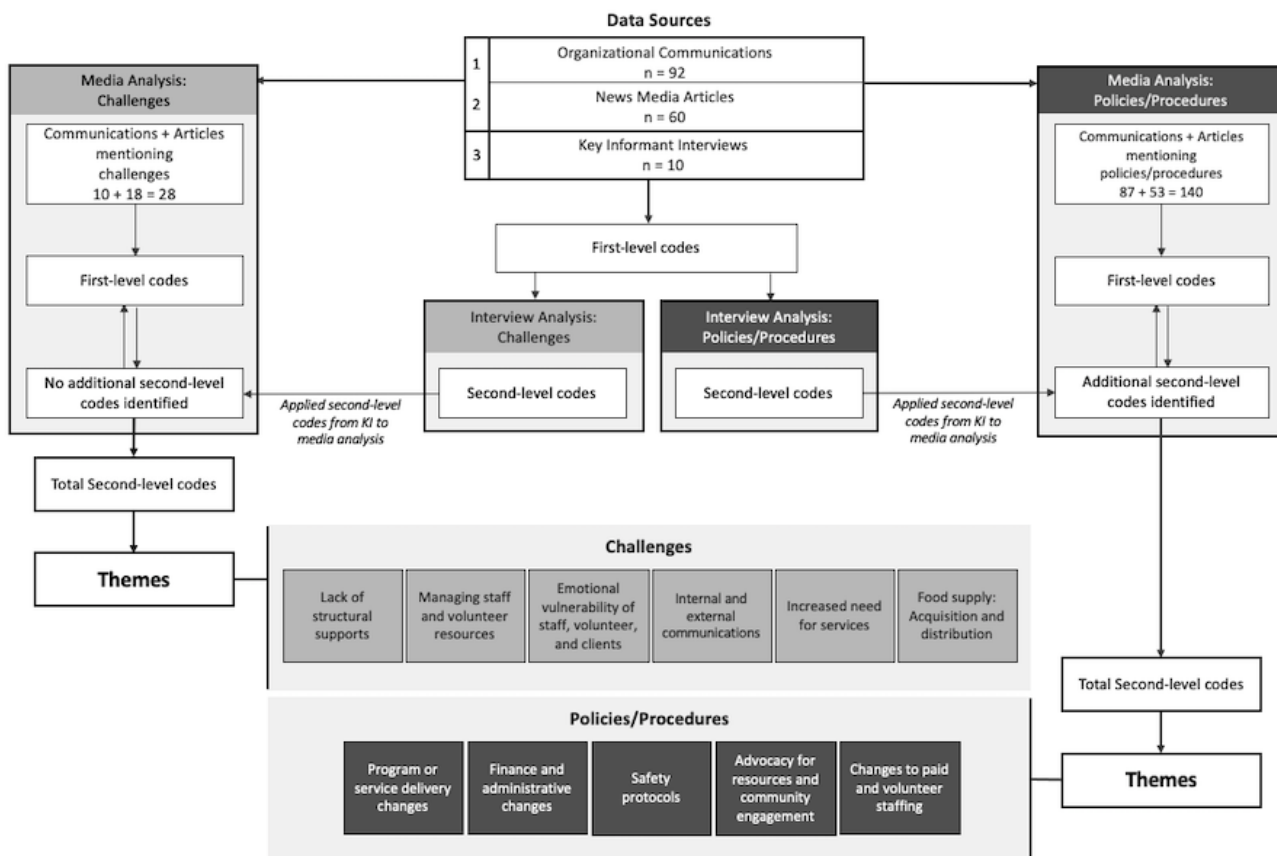
COVID-19 and the charitable food sector (COVID-19 pandemic impact on food security, food shortages, food availability, policies, and public opinions). Next, key terms were used in the publication’s search function to find additional articles. Key terms used were “food security,” “food bank,” “charitable,” and “meal programs.” Candidate articles were then saved and organized according to date.

Key informant interviews

We conducted ten semi-structured interviews with directors/coordinators working in CFOs (nine food banks and one school meal program). Guiding questions focused on operations prior to the pandemic;

how prepared they were when COVID started; challenges they faced (for example, how donations were impacted and how public health directives impacted operations); what policies/procedures were implemented; and recommendations they made for the charitable food sector and government. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit individuals working in rural and urban areas of Manitoba. Eligible individuals were contacted by email and/or phone and invited to participate. Phone interviews took place during May and June of 2020 and were recorded digitally, then transcribed verbatim. This data collection was approved by the University of Manitoba Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (HS23899 J2020:030). See Figure 1 for a schemata of data collection and analysis.

Figure 1: Data collection and coding summary



Data analysis

All documents and interviews were analyzed thematically, guided by the Framework Method in multi-disciplinary health research proposed by Gale and colleagues (2013). A framework matrix designed in Microsoft Excel was used to manage the media data and assist analysis (Table 2). First, all organizational communications and news media articles were reviewed by two research assistants. A matrix of structured summarized data was created to document the policies, procedures, and challenges identified in the media texts. Each row in the matrix represented a challenge or

implemented policy/procedure, and each column represented the data source, including date of publication, organization name, source (social or news media), and description extracted verbatim from text. A first-level code was assigned by the researcher to each entry. Data from organizational communications and news media were added concurrently to the framework. At the end of the data collection phase, each reviewer screened a randomly selected 10% of documents to ensure agreement and consistency in data extraction and reporting. Any disagreement was resolved by consensus with the primary researchers.

Table 2: Framework matrix example

Category	First-level code	Geography	Food Bank	Date (mm_dd)	Description	Reference
Policy	Recruiting younger volunteers	Provincial or Territory	Winnipeg Harvest	03_31	We are actively recruiting younger, healthy individuals, unable to go to university or work, to help keep our warehouse open and food flowing. Be part of one of the most important action groups in the province. If you can help, please fill out an application.	Social media
Challenge	Food supply shortage	Local or Regional	Unemployed Help Centre Food Bank	03_20	June Muir of the Unemployed Help Centre (UHC) in Windsor and the president of the the WEFBA said the region’s food banks—including the food bank at the UHC —only have enough supplies to last another ten days. That’s cause for concern, especially since Muir said her organization served approximately 190 families on Thursday—approximately 100 more than usual.	News media

Clarke and Braun’s (Clarke & Braun, 2012) thematic analysis method was used to analyze the key informant interviews in order to identify the challenges and newly implemented policies/procedures in

response to these challenges. Interviewers independently reviewed the interview transcripts, summarized and extracted relevant statements, and assigned first-level codes. The three interviewers met

regularly to describe and refine code descriptions to ensure consistency in application across the transcripts. The three interviewers and primary researchers met to group first-level codes into second-level codes through discussion and consensus. Second-level codes related to challenges (objective one) were applied to the media analysis framework to explore the need for any additional second-level codes. A similar step was performed for policies/procedures (objective two): first-

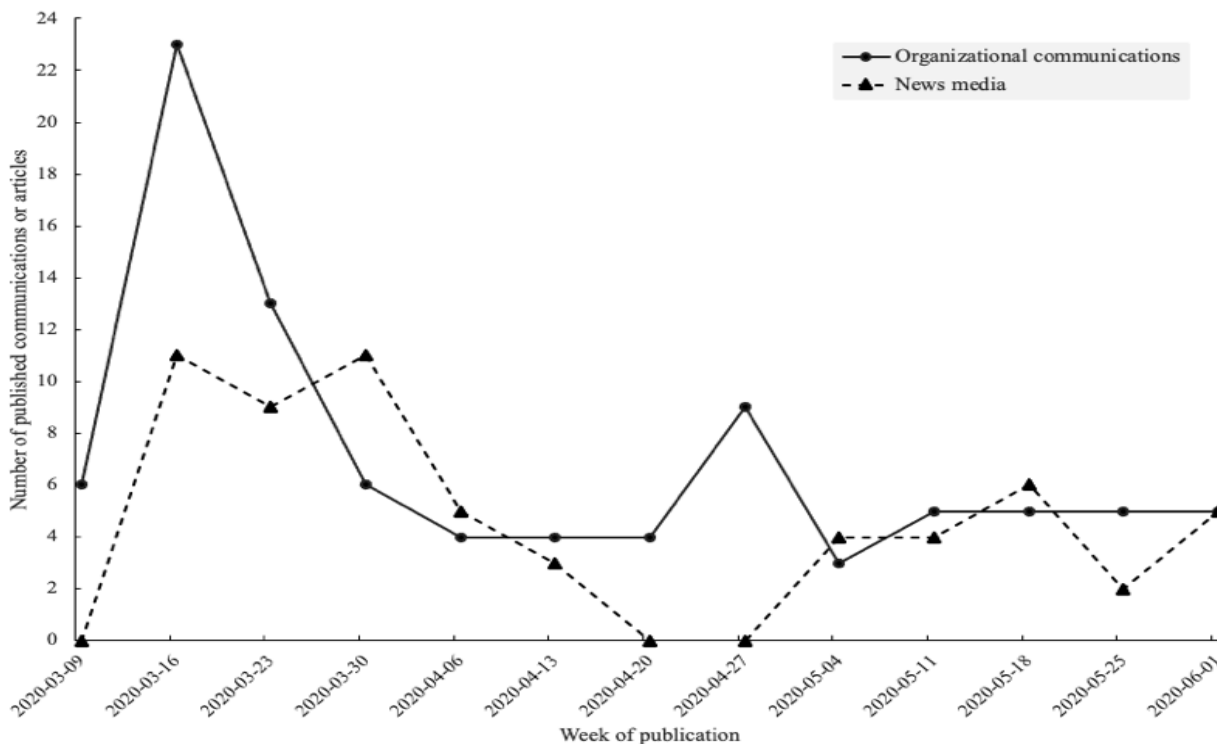
level codes from interviews were grouped into second-level codes, which were then applied to the media analysis framework to generate any additional codes. The final set of second-level codes for both challenges and policies/procedures were then used to form themes for each study objective. Theming was completed through discussion and consensus-building with the interviewers and primary researchers.

Results

We collected and reviewed a total of 152 social media (Facebook) pages, organizational website communications, and news media articles related to COVID-19 (Figure 2). The majority of new media

articles were published in the early weeks of the first wave. Exemplar quotations from media or communications are presented according to date published.

Figure 2: Number of published articles or communications collected weekly from organizational communications (websites and social media) (n = 92) and news media (n = 60) from March 9 to June 5 2020.



We conducted ten key informant interviews, including eight from urban and two from rural CFOs in Manitoba. Interviews averaged approximately 46 minutes (ranging from 25 to 68 minutes).

Challenges

Challenges were defined as disruptions to normal organizational practices prior to the pandemic, including those which impacted staff, volunteers, and clients. Six themes were identified: 1) Increased need for services; 2) Food supply: Acquisition and distribution; 3) Managing staff and volunteer resources; 4) Emotional vulnerability of staff, volunteers, and clients; 5) Internal and external communications; and 6) Lack of structural supports

Increased need for services

Most food banks experienced increases in the number of new clients accessing services. Organizations needed to adjust their operating procedures quickly to account for the increased demand.

When everything first started to happen, we saw panic. We saw an increase. When the layoffs started happening, we saw families coming to us. They were spending their last paycheques on things like rent and car payments to keep a semblance of normality, not knowing when the next paycheque would come. Then they were turning to the food bank for meals. [News media, April 16, 2020]

In the first two weeks, our numbers were jumping and, at that rate, we were able to forecast that by the end of our first month of COVID, we would see a 30% increase of food bank users, and that was true. [Participant 4, Urban]

Food supply: Acquisition and distribution

Most organizations experienced significant challenges with maintaining a sustainable food supply. This was in part because of a reduction in donations from retail grocers (for example, donation bins). Additionally, several CFOs regularly purchased additional food items for hampers directly from grocery stores; however, there were restrictions on how many items could be purchased in one shopping trip, as grocers saw demand outstripping supply. Several CFOs also had large annual fundraising events that had to be cancelled, thereby diminishing their revenue significantly.

‘Most of our food comes through our retail program and through our [Tin for the Bin program]. Unfortunately, because of the consumer panic and buying a lot of things in bulk, we’re finding a lot of shelves are bare as a result,’ she said. ‘People are not remembering the food bank, and our normal retail programs are not able to supply us with food.’ [News media, March 17, 2020]

[Food bank] was having trouble at first because they were given money, like donations and cash, but then when they went to the store by this time they’re [grocery store] limiting what you can take. And so you might need 7000 cans of beans and you can only buy 3! [Participant 8, Urban]

Managing staff and volunteer resources

Increased demand for services required more staff resources; however, safety restrictions limited the number of staff members working at the same time. These difficulties were managed by increasing the number of working hours or shifting responsibilities, both of which left staff feeling overworked and burnt out.

Actually, you know, I guess we kind of lightly had a staffing change in that we had increased hours for our part-time staff, because we had so much work on the go. [Participant 12, Urban]

Some CFOs lost senior volunteers because they felt at risk, while others lost staff and volunteers because of the need to self-isolate or manage childcare. Organizations attempted to cope by recruiting additional volunteer support or scaling back activities.

Well, our volunteers, like I said, are seniors and they are always cautious about their own health and wellbeing, and people say ‘oh, I wouldn’t want to do that.’... You see, you have to be safe and that’s the big issue, we have seniors who... a wonderful couple who help a lot, but they pulled back because [they were] over seventy. You know on the news Doctor Tam was saying we shouldn’t, for those who are higher risk group particularly seniors, so they certainly haven’t been volunteering and I don’t even know whether they’ll come back. [Participant 3, Urban]

‘More than half of Harvest’s food banks run in places of worship, and many of the programs are being run by seniors,’ Taylor-Hughes said on CBC’s Information Radio Tuesday. ‘As a result of that, they’re not opening because they are, of course, a very high-risk group and — rightly so — don’t want to expose themselves,’ she said. [News media, March 17, 2020]

I’m very proud of our team of very small, some folks were even on vacation, so they came back and had to quarantine. We had a couple that had issues with childcare and some that were afraid. So, our hampers were small, but we had to really retool everything, lock our doors, put up all the safety protocols. We want volunteers to help us because our team is very small, so we couldn’t serve all the food banks on our own. [Participant 4, Urban]

Emotional vulnerability of staff, volunteers, and clients

A heightened sense of fear, stress, and anxiety was reported, owing to the pandemic, which negatively influenced staff and client experiences. Staff were stressed when attempting to purchase large quantities at grocery stores, while clients were fearful of attending CFOs or receiving food package deliveries.

People would sort of shame them [staff] because it looked like they were hoarding. One of them made a sign to say ‘I’m shopping for two hundred isolated seniors,’ and she was gonna pull that out if she needed. [Participant 2, Urban]

Our system for delivering the hampers, I would say, is pretty clearly safe. We have social distancing; nobody comes in the building, we’re outside. We put the food out and we close the door. There is no direct contact, yet we’ve got people who are very fearful or they’ve got compromised immune systems and whatever as medical conditions, and they’re not prepared to take that risk. [Participant 3, Urban]

Social isolation and potential loss of income because of the pandemic exacerbated the emotional stress and vulnerabilities for food insecure clients. Some organizations introduced procedures to enhance client dignity and confidentiality.

We didn’t make it available to everybody, but we just had a procedure in place for those that, for who we knew it was an important part of their dignity. And in the moment, she said, ‘could I just come step inside the door and fill up my bag. I really don’t want people to see that I’m here.’ So, that, it was, it was very public, it became very public for our clients to be having them packing, pack their bags and having food outside. [Participant 1, Urban]

Internal and external communications

At the outset of the pandemic, guidelines were evolving rapidly and CFOs found it difficult to manage and prioritize information to keep operations running. Some relied on technology (for example, Zoom) to keep staff working remotely informed about organizational changes.

Just the rate of change. You know what you've just figured out is the right way to do it changes the next day. So the rate of change was and you know even just at the management level—questions about what can you do in-person? Can you do in-person counselling, can you—do you have to use—do you have to get special permission to text people, it ... you know all kinds of small changes that affected the health care system. [Participant 2, Urban]

Most CFOs relied on social media and signage to inform clients about program changes and availability; however, providing reassurance of safety precautions for clients was challenging. Staff and volunteers also experienced less social connection despite wanting to maintain client interactions.

Communication is difficult. You know we're on social media, we post things multiple times a week to let people know what we're doing. One of the challenges we're having is that it's a monthly program so you only qualify once a month, but you have to re-register every month...So I would say communicating the details of the program has probably been our biggest challenge. [Participant 6, Rural]

Newcomer clients, just weren't showing up even though they were, had been regular for like three years coming every other Wednesday and very consistent. And so we don't have their phone numbers so we can't call them to say, are, do you realize that we're still open?

One, they might not realize we're open, secondly, they might be concerned about exposure in coming cause they think that we're operating the way that we always did and they don't want to be coming in. [Participant 1, Urban]

Lack of structural supports

CFOs felt they were not prioritized by government as key agencies during the early stages of the pandemic, despite having existing programs and services for vulnerable people. Their services were an important adjunct to emergency financial benefits, which were insufficient for many.

Community organizations that are addressing food insecurity having the resilience to come to action in a crisis situation or a pandemic, and then having the government aware of those approaches and sort of being able to best direct funding for the most effective approach...having the government be able to support those already effective channels; that might maybe be a better use of funding or might be more effective. [Participant 10, Urban]

While financial supports to individual, eligible Canadians from the federal government (for example, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, Employment Insurance) emerged to assist the newly unemployed, the funds dispersed were not enough to alleviate food insecurity for many.

The reality is folks who are using the food bank now because they've lost jobs and they may not have been jobs for them to go back to, the fact that they're either on CERB or EIA or whatever. Think about 2000 dollars a month, if your rent's 1000 dollars, that gives you 1000 dollars left to pay for your food, your bills, entertainment, anything else. That's not a lot. [Participant 4, Urban]

Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures were examined together, and were defined as guidelines for dealing with the pandemic, as well as specific actions undertaken to carry out the guidelines. Five themes were identified: 1) Program/service delivery changes; 2) Finance and administrative changes; 3) Safety protocols; 4) Advocacy for resources and community engagement; 5) Changes to paid and volunteer staffing.

Program/service delivery changes

These centred around food programs and distribution, hours of operation and location. Several CFOs that ran community food workshops and meal programs had to cancel them.

So everything from Healthy Baby to senior men learning how to cook, teens, kids in the kitchen, how to cook for diabetes, a number of educational skill building programs... those are all cancelled right now. [Participant 2, Urban]

Many CFOs had to cut back on the amount of food distributed in order to meet increased needs, although others switched to larger hampers distributed less frequently.

For now, they are looking at cutting back on the amount of food distributed to each family in order to try and make supplies last longer and share them with more people. [News media, March 25, 2020]

Some organizations had to close temporarily to implement new protocols, or because staff became ill. Others had to re-locate from facilities, such as schools, which were closed by public health orders.

Closing for a week after a staff member became ill. The person doesn't have a fever and isn't thought to have COVID-19, but has been placed in quarantine on the advice of Ottawa Public Health. [News media, March 25, 2020]

All CFOs shifted to pre-packaging food for clients to comply with public health distancing regulations. This practice reduced choice, although it allowed clients to request items outside the given food packages. Portability and client transportation was also a concern. Organizations that ran meal programs shifted to “take-away” hampers, which were time-consuming and costly.

The other people were not allowed to leave anything that they didn't want. They had to take it all... and so our clients weren't necessarily prepared to carry a big box away. Like they were told you can't unpack the box, just take the box and go. Well, in fact we looked at their situation where it's like, okay, not these, this person is on the bus, they cannot... walk away with this big box, they need to actually be able to unpack it into the bags that they brought, in order to carry it more effectively and go home with it. [Participant 1, Urban]

Some organizations had to reduce hours to prepare hampers, while others extended hours to accommodate new protocols. A few CFOs were able to provide home delivery of hampers to meet the needs of clients who could not travel.

COVID-19 Food Box program is a short-term initiative to provide home delivery of food to Nova Scotians who lack the means to access other forms of food support, largely because they can't leave their home and they don't have the funds, friends, or family to help get food. [Organizational communications, March 30, 2020]

Finance and administrative changes

As the pandemic emerged, along with news of the rapidly growing ranks of unemployed Canadians and the pressure on food banks, private businesses and other organizations started making large donations to CFOs. Furthermore, with public health orders restricting interactions between people, most CFOs shifted to requesting monetary donations over food donations.

Feed Ontario has received more than \$200,000 from caring Ontarians in support of the program, as well as generous financial donations from organizations including Hydro One, Ontario Toyota Dealers and Toyota Canada, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Dairy Farmers of Ontario, National Bank of Canada, and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. [Organizational communications, May 6, 2020]

Existing funds were reallocated to priority program needs (for example, purchasing food at higher prices) or new programs to accommodate the increased demand in food bank usage.

FRESH WEEK is just one of the ways we have been able to pivot our services due to COVID-19 and social distancing guidelines. We have enough fresh and perishable items to distribute and we want them to go to those in need. [Organizational communications, May 28, 2020]

Some CFOs made adjustments to the client screening and registration processes to help minimize barriers to food access and to provide additional supports, if needed.

Hampers are designed so you only need to come once a week. You do not need to provide any paperwork or identification. We ask your name and how many people are in your family. We will place your hamper on the

tables located outside of our front door. [Organizational communications, May 5, 2020]

Safety protocols

Public health measures and fear of contagion led to newly implemented safety measures, including regular sanitization, physical distancing, use of personal protective equipment by staff and volunteers, and frequent handwashing.

SFBLC [Saskatoon Food Bank and Learning Centre] has taken preventative measures to enhance public safety to the best of our ability: very frequent cleaning of high touch surfaces, staff and public education and awareness of best practices, frequent handwashing, staying home when ill, encouraging social distancing when possible. [Organizational communications, Mar 13, 2020]

We require people to wear gloves every time they come to serve and sort bags ... umm, we have all our volunteers when they're in the building wearing masks, we provide masks for delivery drivers and gloves for delivery drivers, so that when we're going to meet people, they feel safe. [Participant 6, Rural]

All CFOs limited the number of personnel allowed in the building to comply with social distancing measures. This included shifting food distribution processes outside facilities.

What we're doing is we're serving people right outside. We're putting two tables right outside our front doors on the sidewalk and putting the food on the table and wiping it down in between, in between each client. And as people are coming, we have chairs on the sidewalk that are spaced apart. [Participant 1, Urban]

Some CFOs added organization-specific safety measures after consulting with public health officials (for example, declaration forms).

In order to continue offering its services safely, Moisson Montreal says it will impose new health measures on employees, volunteers and users, including filling out a form and declaring if they or someone they live with has travelled abroad during the last 14 days. People will also have to disclose whether or not they have contracted COVID-19 and if they have or are living with someone who has symptoms of the virus. [News media, Mar 16, 2020]

Advocacy for resources and community engagement

Food banks are part of Canada’s charitable sector and rely primarily on community support and fundraising events for daily operations. The pandemic, which increased need for charitable food while simultaneously presenting organizational challenges such as new safety protocols, led to organizations needing to appeal for community support in novel ways.

Our annual Spring Food & Fund Drive is still running, with one slight change, we have gone virtual! Canada Helps is an online platform that allows you to donate through the comfort of your own home. We also can accept monetary donations in the form of a cheque. [Organizational communications, May 1, 2020]

With the disruption in the food-supply chain, coordinated efforts were needed between community groups to help facilitate and expedite food distribution between existing sources (for example, grocery stores, restaurants to distribute food surpluses).

Food Rescue collects food that’s still good to eat but can’t be sold by Yellowknife’s three grocery stores. It then gives it to fifteen local

charities and social service agencies to deliver to their clients. Thursday, Speakman and Zheke had four stops to make: boxes of ketchup for the YWCA, and food hampers with meat, fresh produce, and dry goods for Lynn’s Place, Hope’s Haven, and Housing First. [News media, Mar 20, 2020]

Larger food bank associations launched campaigns appealing to the provincial government for financial aid to support CFOs and vulnerable clients.

To ensure vulnerable Ontarians have the support they need, and to relieve the demand currently being placed on food banks and social service providers, Feed Ontario is requesting that the Government of Ontario provide immediate financial aid to social assistance recipients so that they may purchase the food and products that they need during this unprecedented time. Create a stabilization fund to provide financial support to non-profits, like food banks, that are providing frontline support during this unexpected pandemic. [Organizational communications, Mar 18, 2020]

Changes to paid and volunteer staffing

Many CFOs had to adjust scheduling of paid and volunteer staff drastically to facilitate physical distancing. In some cases, cutting back on volunteer shifts led to a need to increase paid staffing to keep up with demand. Seniors, who comprised a significant proportion of volunteers, were either requested or chose to stay home in part because of safety concerns.

In order to reduce the risk of illness in our facilities, we made the decision in March to limit volunteers to one shift each week. This meant that we needed 670 individuals per week to fill our volunteers shifts, all while missing our senior volunteers, who make up a large part of our volunteer base.

[Organizational communications, Apr 28, 2020]

Some CFOs reorganized staff responsibilities and volunteer roles to prioritize safety and food procurement, which became increasingly important as the pandemic progressed.

We had to start looking for food. So, we checked with our grocery stores and they couldn't help us, so we had to go look for wholesalers across the country who could meet our ... help us purchase food. So that's something we've never done before. So, that would become a full-time person's job just to source food items because we didn't have any, or were running low on anything. [Participant 4, Urban]

Discussion

This multi-method qualitative study contributes to our understanding of the challenges experienced by CFOs, and subsequent policy/program responses, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. The rapid economic downturn, fostered by mass business closures and related unemployment, coupled with school closures and unprecedented public health measures, increased food insecurity in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020d). Results of this study indicate that CFOs experienced significant challenges during the first wave, when need for emergency food dramatically increased (Daily Bread Food Bank & North York Harvest Food Bank, 2021; Food Banks Canada, 2020; King & Stewart, 2020), for which they required rapid policy and procedural responses. Thus, the impact of COVID-19 on CFOs is a critical area of research to inform Canada's ongoing responses to food insecurity during the pandemic as well as future emergency responses. Finally, results of this study may be of interest to other high-income countries that experienced rapid increases in food insecurity during the pandemic

Organizations experienced significant challenges that arose primarily from increased needs for their services, while having to meet new public health safety measures rapidly, including physical distancing,

enhanced sanitation, use of personal protective equipment, and screening for COVID symptoms (Government of Manitoba, 2021). These were underpinned in the first wave by a lack of financial support, limited direction from government regarding public health recommendations for essential organizations, and overall limited knowledge regarding COVID-19. Organizations adapted to the rapidly evolving socio-economic environment as their resources allowed. They developed policies and programs to continue operations in order to serve existing and new clientele. While many CFOs were able to “pivot” during the crisis to continue operations, their reliance on volunteers, many of whom are seniors, impacted their resiliency (Gerwing, 2020). Older adults were, and continue to be, severely impacted by COVID-19, experiencing severe outcomes disproportionately (Miller, 2020).

At the same time, during the first wave of the pandemic, organizations struggled with lack of coordination at the community level, in a vacuum of government support. This contributed to inefficiencies in operations as CFOs tried to maintain services, albeit in new ways. It was not until after the first wave that Manitoba CFOs began to receive dedicated funding and food resources from different levels of government

(Reimer, 2020). For example, while the \$100 million Emergency Food Security Fund was announced by the Government of Canada to support food banks in April 2020 (Government of Canada, 2021c), many organizations did not receive support until well into or after the first wave (Reimer, 2020). The Manitoba provincial government did not provide any direct funding to CFOs during the first wave, but created a food hamper program for families of students no longer receiving meals because of the cancellation of in-person classes (Annable, 2020). This was not rolled out until May 2020; however, school divisions and individual schools had been providing food to vulnerable student families from the onset of school closures (Samson, 2020).

A key strength of this qualitative study is that it allowed in-depth exploration of a new phenomenon: operation of CFOs during a pandemic. We undertook to interview CFOs personnel and collect media data in real time during the first wave of the pandemic. Rigour was enhanced by the use of verbatim text (news media, organizational websites, social media, and interviews), triangulation of the three data sources, and the use of multiple coders. Data saturation was reached with media reports/communiqués and interviews during the time frame of the study.

There are some important limitations to the study. First, while the document and media analysis were

national and Manitoban in scope, our interviews with key informants were limited to Manitoba. Manitoba experienced a much smaller first wave of COVID-19, particularly when compared to B.C., Ontario, and Quebec. However, the broader public health policies and economic impacts were similar between provinces. Pre-pandemic, Manitoba had a higher prevalence of food insecurity compared to most other provinces (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020), but fewer job losses resulting from COVID-19 compared to other provinces (Statistics Canada, 2020b). We did not, however, observe incongruencies in our findings between the three data sources (media reports, organizational communications, interviews), suggesting that transferability of our findings to other provinces is enhanced. Another limitation is the choice of media sources for data collection. Less mainstream media sources may have reported more critically about the limitations of charitable food responses to COVID. Further research is warranted to assess the efficacy of policy/procedural changes presented in this research, as well as operations of CFOs in Canada during subsequent waves, in particular the impact of direct government funding (Government of Canada, 2021d) and indirect support in the form of surplus food redistribution schemes (Government of Canada, 2021c), a strategy that further obfuscates the underlying causes of food insecurity (Riches, 2021).

Conclusion

This study offers important perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on charitable food providers and organizations in Canada. The pandemic has brought into stark relief problems with food insecurity in this wealthy nation, and how we respond to these

inequities. Long-standing social policies that do not adequately address poverty, racism, colonialism, and other forms of inequality were brought to the forefront, and reliance on the charitable food sector to deal with food insecurity proved woefully inadequate during the

COVID pandemic. At the very least, future pandemic planning (and indeed, other crisis planning) should take into account food security measures to ensure all citizens, and the organizations that serve them, are adequately supported in times of crisis and, of course, in non-crisis times as well. These must be part of systemic policy responses, which can include, but are not reliant exclusively on the charitable sector. This must be approached carefully, however, as the goal is not to “legitimize” CFOs as appropriate responses to inequity through direct government funding. A number of policy responses and frameworks to address food insecurity have been proposed by others, which deserve further research and discussion (Desouza &

Flanery, 2013; James et al., 2021). Some authors suggest that the pandemic has provided a “wake-up call” for our entire food system. They challenge the existing corporate food regime as inadequate for responding to food insecurity, and propose redistributive policies and actions that would increase food equity post-pandemic (James et al., 2021). Others still see the pandemic as compelling evidence for a Canadian guaranteed income scheme that would substantially reduce poverty in vulnerable populations (Forget, 2020; Segal, Banting, & Forget, 2021). Whatever the pathways forward, the pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the status quo, which relies almost exclusively on charitable supports to mitigate food insecurity, is inefficient and inadequate.

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