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Connectivity and Racial Equity in Responding to COVID-19 Impacts in the Chicago Regional Food System

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Connectivity and racial equity in responding to COVID-19 impacts in the Chicago regional food system

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Abstract
The COVID-19 outbreak led to major disruptions in food systems across the globe. In the United States' Chicago region, the outbreak created immediate concerns around increased hunger, food insecurity, supply chain disruptions, and loss of local livelihoods. This was especially evident in communities of color, which faced disproportionate impacts from the pandemic. In March 2020, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) coordinated a Rapid Response Effort that convened people in working groups related to emergency food assistance, local food producers, small businesses, and food system workers to address urgent needs that arose due to the pandemic. Each working group met regularly through virtual calls. This effort has persisted throughout the pandemic in various forms. For this study, we interviewed CFPAC staff members and participants in these calls to create narratives that document respondents' perceptions of the Rapid Response Effort's evolution, benefits, challenges, and potential for long-term impacts.

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Thematic analysis conducted across these narratives revealed the importance of network connections to overcoming food system disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis also underscored challenges associated with racism in efforts to strengthen local and regional food systems. These findings indicate a need for research and practice that intentionally attend to power disparities related to race within collaborative networks in order to structure local and regional food systems to achieve greater racial equity and resilience to future shocks.

Keywords
Pandemic, COVID-19, COVID-19 Response, Resilience, Food Justice, Race, Equity, Social Network Formation, Multisectoral Collaboration, Community Engagement, Local Food System, Mutual Aid

Introduction and Literature Review
The COVID-19 pandemic caused myriad disruptions within food systems and led to food insecurity and other impacts in the U.S. that disproportionately affected people of color. In the Chicago metropolitan region, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) organized a Rapid Response Effort that united people within and across food system sectors to address the pandemic's ever-changing impacts. This exploratory research documents experiences of the Rapid Response Effort through narratives gathered from CFPAC staff and other Rapid Response participants. The results affirm the importance of collaborative networks in responding to the pandemic's food system impacts but also emphasize the challenges of overcoming power disparities within networks that arise from social inequities related to race.

Food System Disruptions During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Despite its ability to provide an efficient supply of cheap goods, the dominant food system has become fragile and susceptible to collapse upon the rise of a single disruptor. This was observed globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused various disruptions to food systems across demand-side, supply-side, and integrated pro-

cesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has yet to cease and still has some countries questioning global food security risks (Zhan & Chen, 2021). Disruptions occurred within supply chains, including physical inaccessibility to food products due to social distancing and quarantine restrictions. In the U.S., examples of supply-side disruptions included temporary factory closures or restricted staffing (in meat packaging, food-processing, and production facilities), labor shortages, disruptions to transport networks, and quarantine regulations for cross-border imports (Aday & Aday, 2020; Hobbs, 2020). On the demand side, challenges included panic buying, a fall in consumer incomes from pandemic-induced unemployment, a decrease in community accessibility through institutional closures, and new pressures on the food retailing sector due to business closures (Hobbs, 2020).

The current global food system operates on the neoliberal ideology that the best way to drive development is through consumerism and global trade routes (Benton, 2020). In the dominant, neoliberal food system, productivist policies focused on maximizing yield and profit using technology to reduce labor costs have made it increasingly difficult for smaller agricultural actors to be successful. Agricultural subsidies, market deregulation, and privatization have devalued alternative agricultural practices, and this has led to a decline in small farms and local food systems (Laforge et al., 2017). However, evaluations of COVID-19's impacts on the food system have revealed the rigidity of our current food system, with advocates pointing toward a refocus on local food supply chains as a solution (Hobbs, 2020).

COVID-19 Exacerbated Racial Inequities in Food System
In the U.S., COVID-19 underscored not only the food system's vulnerability but also its racial inequities. Pre-pandemic, household food insecurity (i.e., "unable, at times, to acquire food for one or more household members" [Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019, p. 4]) was disproportionately higher among racially minoritized groups. A survey of U.S. households documented increases in food insecurity across all racial groups due to COVID-19; however, Black,

Asian, and Hispanic[1] respondents were significantly less confident about their household food security than white respondents. Among food-insecure households, more Black households reported that they could not afford to buy food, while more Asian and Hispanic households reported being afraid to go out to buy food due to anti-Asian xenophobia or risks of deportation (Morales et al., 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity in Chicago had been decreasing (Nelson, 2020), yet a consistent racial gap in food access persisted (Kolak et al., 2018) due to a history of systemic disinvestment of the South and West sides of Chicago. The COVID-19 pandemic increased food insecurity and exacerbated existing inequalities (Nelson, 2020). In June 2021, the City of Chicago reported food insecurity levels in the overall Chicago metro region at 19%, with food insecurity within Latine communities at 29% and in Black communities at 37%—percentages "significantly above pre-pandemic levels" (City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor, 2021, p. 2). Communities of color face parallel injustices as food system inequities co-occur with health concerns, a result of a broken food system that increases malnourishment. People of color have had disproportionately higher COVID-19 hospitalization and death rates in the U.S. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), and there appears to be a link between food insecurity and a higher risk of developing more severe COVID-19 symptoms (Klassen & Murphy, 2020).

Another parallel food injustice begot by systemic racism is the marginalization of people of color in the agricultural industry. Rooted historically in slavery and laws that alienated African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican and other Latine immigrants, and Asian immigrants from the land, the exclusion of people of color from prospering in farming and food-related enterprises persists today (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Horst & Marion, 2019; Lunsford et al., 2021). This occurs even though the U.S. food system operates on the labor of people of color (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2022) and that African American and Native American foodways, among others, illustrate ways to build diversified and adaptive food systems to better nourish all communities (Lunsford et al., 2021). Persistent inequities in the food system reflect structural racism, which Lawrence and Keleher (2004) define as:

> the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal—that routinely advantage Whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by White supremacy—the preferential treatment, privilege, and power for White people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab, and other racially oppressed people. (p. 1)

Governmental responses to the pandemic's impacts on the food system have been criticized for perpetuating racial disparities. One such case was the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, which excluded small- and midsize farms as well as those owned by women and people of color, and failed to ensure equitable food distribution (Broad Leib et al., 2021).

Resisting racism in the U.S. food system as well as white-led alternative food movements, *food justice* affirms Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities' right to grow, sell, and eat food that is healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate, and produced in ways that promote the welfare of land, workers, and animals (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Prior to the pandemic, Chicago food justice advocates worked to go beyond providing food in food-insecure communities by transforming the underlying power structures that deny communities of color investment, resources, and decision-making control related to food and agriculture (Block et al., 2012).

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[1] We use the term "Hispanic" when used in the original source; otherwise, we use "Latine" to refer to people of diverse races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages who share Latin American ancestry. We opt for Latine to include all gender identities (Celis Carbajal, 2020).

Responding to Pandemic Impacts

When the pandemic hit the Chicago region, numerous organizations responded to food system disruptions, including the anticipated higher rates of food insecurity in communities of color noted above. For example, 40 mutual aid organizations throughout Chicago have addressed food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic by forming relationships that enable sharing food and establishing infrastructure like storage and transportation that is needed to distribute food to communities (Lofton et al., 2021). Among efforts to respond to COVID-19 disruptions in the food system, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) coordinated the Rapid Response Effort. This multifaceted emergency response initiative began in early March 2020, when a key team of CFPAC staff quickly organized and brought people together to brainstorm solutions to unfolding pandemic-related crises through groups that focused on emergency food assistance, food businesses, food chain workers, local food producers, funders, and a "rhizome" network (the latter served to connect across other groups). Conducted virtually due to state-mandated restrictions against gathering in person, the Rapid Response Effort built relationships through online meetings or "calls." These working groups convened frequently (e.g., weekly) at the pandemic's start; meetings grew less frequent (e.g., monthly) as the effort evolved with changing pandemic conditions. Central to this effort was garnering support for communities most affected by the impacts of COVID-19 and pivoting efforts when necessary to respond better to participants' priorities. Through this quickly formulated and action-oriented effort, CFPAC coordinated and continues to facilitate emergency food, funding, and other resource distribution to communities affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaborative Network Benefits and Challenges

The Rapid Response Effort is an example of a collaborative network. Myriad studies have noted the benefits of network building in strengthening regional food systems. For example, surveying Canadian and U.S. farmers, Laforge et al. (2017) found that many respondents felt that governmental support for local farmers was insufficient; they valued support from other local farmers and grassroots organizations. Building networks allows for sharing information, knowledge, and resources (Laforge et al., 2017), as well as identifying social problems within communities, determining practical solutions, and providing important services (Provan et al., 2005), especially when those services are not reliably provided by the government. Forming networks of individuals and organizations in local or regional food systems also can be important to improving local, state, or federal policy. For example, a U.S. case study of the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) documented the benefits of increased social network connections, including market accessibility, hybridized state- and local-level partnerships, and increased trust between government officials and local citizens. They found that partners, including governmental actors, working together identified unexpected barriers to governmental program effectiveness and strategies to address those (Dollahite et al., 2005).

While networks are important to robust local and regional food systems, several barriers can impede collaboration. Challenges arise, in part, because network building takes place within the larger neoliberal economic system. For example, McGuire et al. (2013) noted that many farmers internalize neoliberal values to maximize production. Internalized values of competition and free market capitalism can hinder farmers' willingness to participate in network building if they prefer to work individually as opposed to collectively. For collaborating parties to be motivated to invest their resources, they must believe that the collaboration will lead to mutually beneficial outcomes (Miller & McCole, 2014). But organizations also must prioritize their own needs and meet the demands of their stakeholders, clients, and funders; this can interfere with their abilities to act collectively. Cooperation may not always be in an organization's best interests and can sometimes reduce the managerial autonomy of individual organizations, which may diminish their incentive to participate in a collaborative network (Provan et al., 2005).

Even when individuals and organizations are willing to cooperate, unequal resource distribution can prevent networks from being equitable because they favor those in dominant social positions.

Resource distribution, including funding, can be easily mismanaged without local knowledge and data. For instance, the main barrier observed in the FMNP case study referenced earlier was an inadequate supply of resources across all sites (Dollahite et al., 2005). Finances also can influence power dynamics within networks and create a risk of co-optation. For example, in 2012, the Manitoba Food Processers Association formed a committee to create a "Buy Manitoba" program to increase demand for local food. The committee included grassroots organizations; however, industry groups' ability to match funding gave them the most power over the program. Major corporations eventually co-opted Buy Manitoba, labeling their products as "Made In Manitoba" even though they were only processed there (Laforge et al., 2017).

Research Purpose

Given the benefits associated with collaborative networks but also the challenges that can impede their success, we sought to understand the experiences within the COVID-19 Rapid Response Effort, a network of working groups facilitated by CFPAC to respond to the food system disruptions caused by the pandemic. Specifically, we gathered narratives about the Rapid Response Effort through interviews with CFPAC staff and other call participants, including a grower, public health professional, social entrepreneur, policy advocate, and funder. We inquired about their motivations in the Rapid Response Effort; perceptions of its evolution and impacts; experiences of its culture regarding racial identity, equity, and power; and insights into its potential to support long-term change in Chicago's regional food system. Our analysis of the narrative responses to these questions was inductive, allowing patterns to emerge from the stories (Patton, 2002). While strengthening network connections was essential to the positive outcomes resulting from the Rapid Response Effort, power disparities related to systemic racism posed a central challenge. Our results can inform movements to help build equitable and resilient food systems that are able to provide sufficient, culturally appropriate, and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances (Tendell et al., 2015).

Applied Research Methods

We used narrative methodology to gather stories about the lived experiences of research participants (Appendices A and B). Narrative methodology differs from other research approaches because it evokes rich data with "characters, a plot, and development towards a resolution" (Ospina & Dodge, 2005, p. 143). Collecting stories enables the creation of first-person written accounts, or narratives, that "allow access to professional craft and experiential knowledge otherwise invisible to those outside the occupation" (Morgan-Fleming, 2007). Eliciting human-centered stories can illuminate the complexity of a situation that less-dimensional methods, like short-form online surveys, could otherwise miss. In this study, we center the lived experiences of CFPAC staff and other individuals participating in the Rapid Response Effort, including a grower, policy organizer, public health professional, social entrepreneur, and funder (Table 1). Between November 2020 and July 2021, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews over Zoom software with five CFPAC staff members and five CFPAC Rapid Response participants. We then crafted a narrative from each interview transcript and analyzed data across these narratives to identify emergent themes.

Limitations of our research relate to its sample. The five interviews with CFPAC staff included everyone who played substantive roles in the initiation and ongoing facilitation of the Rapid Response Effort. However, the five nonstaff participants were identified through volunteer sampling and compose a small subset of Rapid Response participants, which numbered over 350 individuals from various organizations and communities at the effort's peak. Some of those 350-plus participants were no longer involved by the time of this study. Of the many participants who were still involved, responses were low likely due to competing demands for people's time (e.g., paid work) and our inability to provide a financial incentive. Our aim, however, was not to generalize across all participants in the Rapid Response Effort but to gather detailed, first-person accounts that provide access to each respondent's unique experiential knowledge. Recognizing that each story reflects the narrator's bias, and that we also

bring biases to the research given our own social positions, we made sure during data analysis to identify not only converging patterns but also diverging patterns by seeking discrepant evidence (Maxwell, 2005). Our results highlight specific insights regarding the challenge of navigating racial dynamics in collaborative networks that may be transferable to food movements more broadly.

This research was initiated in an upper-level undergraduate food systems course instructed by Schusler. Obach, Perdue, and Vaca co-designed the study under Schusler's guidance and in consultation with Sheikh, who served at that time as CFPAC's systems and strategy manager. The latter helped ensure that the study would have practical relevance for CFPAC and that the language used in recruitment materials and interview guides would be meaningful and accessible to Rapid Response participants. CFPAC staff did not play any role in data collection or analysis. The study was approved by the Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment and Sample

We first sought to understand the Rapid Response Effort through CFPAC staff members' perspectives because they had been the most extensively involved. We then invited other Rapid Response participants to take part in this research using a recruitment flyer designed to be accessible and engaging, an online form for participants to express interest, and a follow-up email sent to those interested in the study. Anyone involved in a Rapid Response working group was eligible to participate and compensated with a gift of locally roasted coffee beans. CFPAC's communication staff distributed the recruitment flyer with the embedded interest form by email, newsletters, and social media. We also joined two Rapid Response Rhizome calls to introduce ourselves and our study, and invite participants.

We interviewed a total of 10 respondents: five CFPAC staff and five other Rapid Response participants. There was greater racial diversity among the staff and less among other participants interviewed (Table 1). This might reflect that white participants possessed the greater privilege to take time away from other demands in order to participate in a research interview, for example, because they could be interviewed as part of a professional job. We also acknowledge the positionality of our research team given our own social identities. Among the four university-based researchers, one is an assistant professor and three were undergraduate students at the time of the study. All use she/her/hers pronouns. Two identify as white, one as white and Filipina, and one as Latina. Through their own lived experiences as women of color, the latter two were able to relate directly to specific aspects of our conversations with research participants, which was not true for all team members.

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic and Gender Identities of Interview Participants

Rapid Response Role	Self-identified Race/Ethnicity	Gender or Pronouns
CFPAC staff: Systems and Strategy Manager	Indian/Pakistani Minority	all pronouns
CFPAC staff: Community Partnerships Manager	Mexican and Pakistani	she/her
CFPAC staff: Communication Specialist	Half-White, Half-Filipino	she/her
CFPAC staff: Good Food Purchasing Plan Manager	White	she/her
CFPAC staff: Executive Director	White	he/him
Participant: Grower and Advocate	Immigrant	gender nonconforming
Participant: Social Entrepreneur	Greek American	she/her
Participant: Funder	White	she/her
Participant: Policy Organizer	White	she/her
Participant: Public Health Professional	White	she/her

Data Collection

Prior to each interview, we familiarized ourselves with the interviewee through their LinkedIn profile, when available, and organizational websites. We also read Rapid Response working group notes kept by CFPAC staff and available to all call participants in a shared Google Drive folder. Interviews with staff occurred 8–9 months after the Rapid Response Effort began. We inquired about the principles guiding their work, how their identities inform their work, evolution of the Rapid Response working groups, pivotal moments, perceived impacts, forces that impeded the effort, lessons learned, and desired directions for the effort's future (see Appendix A). Based on our understanding of the Rapid Response Effort gained from interviews with CFPAC staff, we focused the interviews with other participants on their motivations for joining one or more working groups; connections they made through the calls; perceived impacts; observations on the interplay of race, equity, and power within the working group(s); logistical feedback; and hopes for long-term outcomes (Appendix B). Interviews with nonstaff participants occurred 14–16 months after the effort's start. All interviews were semi-structured to allow for the flow of natural conversation and for inductive information to surface. At least two researchers conducted each interview, which lasted 45–60 minutes for CFPAC staff and 30–45 minutes for Rapid Response participants. Staff interviews were longer in length than those of other participants because the staff facilitated one or more working groups throughout the full duration of the Rapid Response Effort and possessed more intimate knowledge of the effort overall. The interviews occurred via Zoom and were recorded.

Crafting and Analyzing Narratives

After conducting each interview, we had the audio recording professionally transcribed and reviewed each transcript against the recording to correct any errors. Then we transformed each transcript into a story-like narrative written in the voice of each interviewee (Forester et al., 2005). We edited the transcript to remove tangential portions of the conversation, sometimes reorganized content so that the narrative flowed logically, and removed some

(but not all) filler words, such as "like" and "um." We sought to ensure that the narrative read as if the person were talking about their experience. After creating each narrative, we emailed it to the interviewee to review and confirm that we authentically represented their voice. Some requested minor revisions, which we integrated. Interviewees also chose whether they would like to be personally identified in their story or have their identity kept confidential.

We analyzed the narratives using NVivo 12.0 software. Our initial coding system included six key themes that followed our lines of inquiry during the interviews: motivation for initiating or joining the calls, perceived benefits and impacts, challenges experienced, the evolution of the call space, identity within the call space, and hopes for long-term impacts. We inductively analyzed data within each of these overarching themes, allowing codes to arise from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Two researchers (Obach and Vaca) independently coded the five staff interviews. Each analyst identified "parent nodes" to represent the overarching themes and finer-scaled "child nodes" to capture more specific nuances within the data under each broad theme. The analysts and Schusler met weekly throughout this process to identify similarities and differences in their emerging analyses. As expected, some overlap occurred in the analyses as well as some differences in how each analyst organized the parent and child nodes. The differences did not reflect conflicting analyses but rather different approaches to organizing the data. By discussing these points of difference and agreeing upon a unified coding approach, we arrived at a consensus on a coding system (Harry et al., 2005) that we deemed most robustly represented the data across these five narratives (Obach & Vaca, 2021). With this coding system as a basis for further analysis, one researcher (Obach) analyzed the narratives of the nonstaff Rapid Response participants interviewed in regular consultation with Schusler. This led to the identification of additional "child nodes" within each theme.

Results

Next, we report the results of thematic analysis across interviewees' narratives of the Rapid

Response Effort. We describe the Rapid Response Effort's impetus and evolution, perceptions about the importance of social networks, challenges that arose related to race and societal dynamics of privilege and oppression, and desires for its future direction.

Rapid Response Impetus and Evolution

CFPAC staff described initially creating Rapid Response working groups to maintain and expand connectivity in their network amid the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to respond to the specific needs of each group's sector. "We wanted to rapidly respond to the needs on the ground, and we wanted to maintain our connectivity to our stakeholders on the ground, and really know what was going on with folks," explained a staff member. Working groups evolved over time in response to the priorities that CFPAC staff heard from call participants. "What we really want to do [in order] to provide better, more sustainable impact is to push resilient thinking. Resilience is not that everything is good; resilience is that you can pivot," noted another staff member who facilitated working group calls.

Nonstaff participants noted numerous factors that influenced their involvement with the effort. Some wanted to mobilize and find solutions to immediate crises in the food system. "In the beginning, there was a push to get growers [involved].… Folks wanted to do mutual aid work, folks needed technical support, folks needed funding," shared a call participant. Other individuals (e.g., funders, growers, business leaders) who could provide specific resources, such as funding, fresh produce, cold storage, or personal protective equipment (PPE), joined the calls. Another participant reflected, "We saw [CFPAC] doing a good job of pulling people together. … The fact that they had people who were convening those calls, we thought was an important service to the field." This involved building relationships through a virtual setting, providing support to those affected by the impacts of COVID-19, and pivoting efforts when necessary to respond to conditions on the ground.

Food System Network Connections

Both CFPAC staff and other call participants reported diverse benefits resulting from the Rapid Response Effort, some intended and others serendipitous, some directly due to the effort and others through a domino effect.

Relationship Building

According to all interviewees, the Rapid Response Effort expanded existing networks and developed new connections (Figures 1 and 2) among people within and across food system sectors (e.g., farmers, producers, distributors, food workers, funders, grant writers, local governments, and community-based organizations) and across different regional communities, particularly communities of color, which were hit hardest by COVID-19 and its impacts.

Staff reflected that the calls initially served as a place where individuals or organizations formed direct connections with one another. "The most meaningful aspect of working on the Rapid Response for me has been the speed of the collaborations that have occurred. [Transitioning to an] online [communications model], it is much easier to bring people together in a much more rapid way. There is a lot more engagement across distinct groups, communities, neighborhoods, and sectors in a much more rapid fluid way than was happening before," observed a staff member. Over the effort's duration, it eventually became more of an information exchange hub where people could find out about available funding, training programs, collaborative opportunities, etc.

Nonstaff call participants noted that several connections previously existed, but coming to the calls gave them a more holistic understanding of individuals, groups, and their various roles within the food system. This facilitated clarity and easier collaboration on projects. "CFPAC was able to pull together a lot of good networks out there that were already known, at least to somebody in CFPAC, and that was the fast glue," observed one call participant. Another noted, "The kinds of networks that people were already in was more visible through the CFPAC conversations than it may have been before. It was a convening point for a lot of people to come together." Another shared,

"I think understanding who the players were, being able to make that connection between the people [and] the businesses … that was an essential thing that came out of the rhizome calls that I didn't understand before or know who those people were."

Setting Priorities, Exchanging Information, and Taking Action

Nonstaff call participants reported that this illumination of the network of individuals and organizations engaged in the food system helped them to coordinate with others on specific projects to address immediate needs, such as the distribution of emergency food and PPE (Figure 1). Staff also observed people coming together through the online working groups, which evolved in composition and focus over time, to address different, yet equally urgent, priorities concurrently. "We wanted to figure out how we could help create those connections and matchmaking. This was especially true with institutions abruptly shutting down and suddenly all these distributors had food that they had planned to supply these large institutions with, and they were just sitting on it," explained a staff member. "Getting people to quantify their needs, understand and gathering that information, and playing the role of a convener has benefitted the people that come up to the meetings and that are working in communities," noted another.

Tangible Impacts

In the context of the uncertain and changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff observed that the Rapid Response Effort's strengthening of existing networks and creation of new connections allowed for multiple solutions to emerge through collaborations across various food system sectors (Figure 2). Both staff and nonstaff participants described tangible impacts that came about through connections within the Rapid Response Effort, such as small business support, nonprofit coordination, food box programs, access to cold storage, PPE distribution, and research to identify high-priority needs, as well as the food, infrastructure, funding, or other resources required to meet those needs (Figures 1 and 2).

Governmental Policy Influence

Some interviewees also perceived that the connections made through the Rapid Response Effort allowed for people holding less influence in the food system, such as small-scale producers and community-based organizations, to build power and more effectively influence state or federal policies and programs. For example, CFPAC helped to coordinate a collective statement calling on the USDA to make changes in its emergency-response Farmers to Families Food Box Program to better meet the needs of local communities and small-scale farmers. The Rapid Response Effort also coordinated individuals and organizations to advocate for directing federal funding to communities of color and food businesses led by people of color. This contrasts with traditional emergency programs that outsource food resources without returning any financial investment in communities nor considering the cultural relevance of the foods supplied. In this way, the information exchange and collaboration occurring through the Rapid Response Effort's hub of networks appear to have helped counterbalance dominant power structures in the food system.

Challenges of Equity and Power

The ability of the Rapid Response Effort's collaborative network to counterbalance dominant power structures in the food system was limited, however, by a key challenge that arose within its working groups. CFPAC staff as well as some of the call participants whom we interviewed observed that racial dynamics related to systems of power and hierarchy in society at large arose within the online space, including instances of micro- and macroaggressions.

While CFPAC as an organization prioritized racial equity in its mission, translating that across all the working groups proved difficult. "We had to continuously work through the entrenched institutional racism that exists in the food system," explained a staff member. The staff described two main aspects of the challenge: making sure everyone (especially Black, Brown, and Indigenous leaders) felt safe within the call space and encouraging a balance of self-care and work during the early peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important

Figure 1. Nonstaff Call Participants Described Strengthening or Forming New Network Connections with Other Organizations through the Rapid Response Effort

These collaborations supported specific actions, as noted in the key, to address food system disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
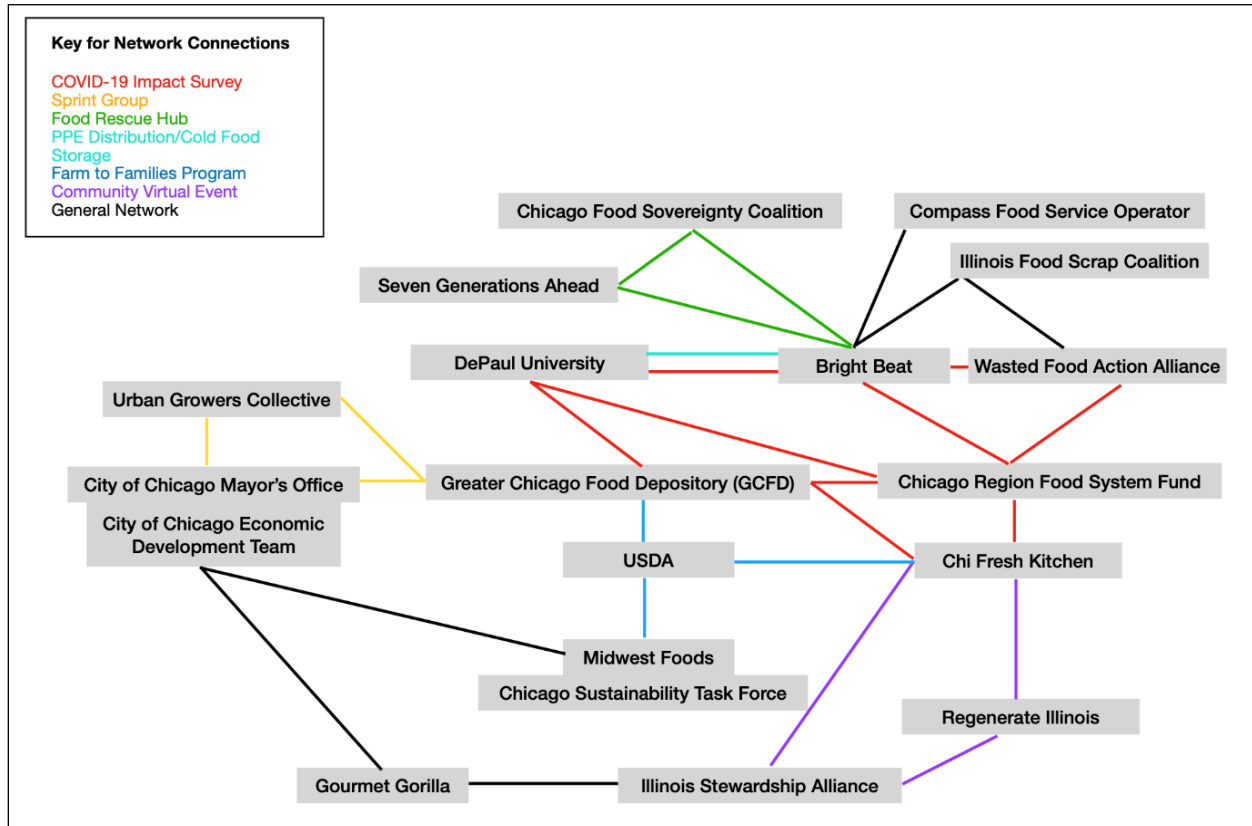
to note that people were emotionally taxed not only by the pandemic. In the summer of 2020, working group calls took place while Black Lives Matter protests occurred in Chicago (and around the country) in response to the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis.

CFPAC staff intended the working group calls to be a safe, comfortable space for individuals to express concerns and connect with one another. "We have … to operate in a way that creates more racial equity. … I acknowledge that … my Whiteness is a place of privilege. That I need to be working in explicitly anti-racist ways to counterbalance all the systemic racism that structures the way in which policy and our city budget, for example, operates," reflected a staff member. Yet, despite staff intentions, the working group calls did not feel safe for everyone.

The white-identifying participants whom we interviewed noted that they felt welcome during the calls, but one participant identifying as a person of color spoke critically about the call space:

> [The calls] showed me that a lot of advocacy organizations need to do a lot more work to be more in tune to the needs of the folks on the ground. … That reflects that they need to do a lot of internal processing: How do they engage with the community? What is their mission? How are they centering the people that they say that they're working with? How are they giving those folks that they say that they work with a space in their decision making? … not just using them as images, or tokenizing their work. … More on the broader side: How are the folks you are serving having part of the decision making of your work? … As a farmer

Figure 2. Network and Outcomes of CFPAC's Rapid Response Effort, as Described by CFPAC Staff Interviewed

Virtual working groups are represented in red/orange, categorical sectors in the regional food system in purple, and perceived impacts in green.

we get reached out a lot by organizations. They want to hear from us, they want to talk to us, and we have great ideas. But you're not compensating me for my time. My ideas and my words will just be used in a research report. It just feels extractive at that point. That is still very much at play, and for me, [I want to be] rooting and really pushing folks that are willing to have a less extractive relationship with the people that we say that we serve.

These concerns helped to reveal discrepancies between the desire to hear from specific groups, such as growers, and insufficient action to address the problems voiced by those groups. This same participant felt that the calls were too focused on large nonprofits and service providers, and as a result, tended to neglect individuals and communities of color, who were less represented in these organizations.

CFPAC responded to such challenges by offering "Interrogating Whiteness" circles open to white-identifying participants to help these participants come with a different conviviality to meetings so that participants of color did not feel uncomfortable or ostracized during the calls. The circles involved virtual discussions about race, Whiteness, and food system equity that occurred twice a month and were facilitated by an outside consultant who specialized in anti-racism. "We've received a lot of messages from people when we have re-centered the conversation on racial equity … because they either were not aware, or they were deeply aware and wanted the issues to be addressed," noted a staff member. "I feel grateful that I was able to participate in something that's developing and shaping the way the others in my group and myself [view that] equity lens," shared a nonstaff participant who took part in the "Interrogating Whiteness" discussions. Yet, staff and the

nonstaff participant who identified as a person of color noted that the need for racial equity training to re-center conversations and shift internal systems of hierarchy and power continues.

Perceptions of Future Direction

Staff and nonstaff participants alike noted the potential to leverage local responses to the macroscale disruptions of the pandemic into opportunities for action toward racial equity and food system resilience in the long term. "What we're really trying to do is sow the seeds of long-term change through our immediate rapid response to the pandemic," reflected a staff member. "A lot of these connections, a lot of these networks that have arisen [built from the effort], are going to outlast COVID," reflected another. Nonstaff participants stated that improved resource distribution and increased information exchange may aid in building a more resilient regional food system that can better withstand future shocks. For example, one nonstaff participant described the Rapid Response Effort's largest impact as "the ability to use the unfortunateness of the pandemic to develop long-term planning for food insecurity in the City of Chicago." Nonstaff participants envisioned continuing work that supports community-driven projects and food enterprises led by people of color, advances policy changes to ensure the safety and livelihoods of food industry workers, and builds the food system's resilience to future shocks, such as another pathogen or climate change impacts. The Rapid Response Effort initially arose to address immediate disruptions due to COVID-19; however, our interviews indicate that the enhanced connectivity it created holds potential to persist and contribute to disrupting racial inequities in the food system over the long term. The Rapid Response Effort has now become the Chicago Food Justice Rhizome Network and continues to meet monthly as of March 2022.

Discussion

Narrative research exploring the process evolution, perceived benefits, and challenges of the CFPAC-facilitated Rapid Response Effort found that a key benefit identified by CFPAC staff and Rapid Response participants interviewed for this study was relationship-building that fostered connections, resource-sharing, and novel solutions as people worked to address the impacts of COVID-19 on the regional food system. Yet, collaborative progress was impeded by hierarchies of privilege and oppression based upon race (and other facets of identity) that, as in society at large, played out within the working groups.

A key reported impact of the Rapid Response Effort was strengthening existing and developing new networks, relationships, and connections across people working in the same food system sector as well as across different sectors and geographic communities. CFPAC's facilitation of the Rapid Response Effort created a hub of networks (Figure 2) responding to immediate needs that interviewees reported led to tangible impacts, such as programs providing culturally relevant emergency food sourced from local farmers, infrastructure provision like cold storage, and PPE distribution to workers. Narratives about the Rapid Response Effort highlighted collaborative network benefits similar to those documented in prior research, including supporting local farmers and grassroots organizations; sharing information, knowledge, and resources; identifying and providing solutions to social problems within communities; and advocating for equity within governmental programs (Dollahite et al., 2005; Laforge et al., 2017; Provan et al., 2005).

Yet, some interviewees raised questions about who held greatest influence within the Rapid Response Effort. As Dollahite et al. (2005) found in the FMNP program discussed in the introduction, we also documented perceptions that unequal resource distribution favored those in dominant social groups, while disadvantaging participants with marginalized social identities. Fair resource allocation in networks can be threatened by an unequal distribution of power (Laforge et al., 2017). In the Rapid Response Effort, societal systems of hierarchy and dynamics of privilege made it difficult to center the voices of people of color in the working group calls. To address this, CFPAC coordinated "Interrogating Whiteness" circles "seeking to dismantle White supremacy by addressing White fragility and breaking White solidarity" (CFPAC, 2020, p. 15). Intentionally creating

opportunities for conversations like these can pro-
mote self-reflection and actionable steps for harm
reduction by people who hold power due to white
privilege.

For equitable collaborative networks, it also is
important to monitor how power dynamics may
shift over time, especially given that goals, financial
resources, and internal structures of individual
organizations can change with time, which in turn
can affect their roles in the network (Provan et al.,
2005). In the Rapid Response Effort, for example,
growers' opinions were especially needed in the
local food producers working group, but they had
little time to give. Unlike staff in nonprofit organi-
zations or government agencies, attending working
group calls did not fall within growers' compen-
sated jobs and took time away from earning their
livelihoods growing food, as the grower whom we
interviewed explained. As Miller and McCole
(2014) note, more strategic approaches need to be
developed to allow for the most highly affected
stakeholders to contribute and offer ideas or cri-
tiques in collaborative networks.

Our results highlight an important focus for
future research and practice: how to overcome rac-
ism in the collaborative networks that support local
and regional food system movements. Potential
areas of inquiry include acknowledgement of white
privilege, equitable resource distribution, and build-
ing community power through network connec-
tions. How does white privilege control who
speaks, who listens, and who gets recognition in
collaborative networks? How might anti-racism
training for white-identifying participants shift
these dynamics? What does equitable resource dis-
tribution look like and how can that be maintained
in a food system? How are networks supporting
historically marginalized communities to build
power, influence policy, and reclaim local food sys-
tems?

Answering these questions will require collabo-
ration between researchers and practitioners. As
one of our interviewees noted, however, these rela-
tionships often feel extractive to people working
on the ground in local communities. It is important
that researchers investigating how to overcome
power inequities related to race (and other social
identities) in collaborative food system networks

center the voices of people affected by oppression,
compensate them for their time, and recognize
them for the knowledge they contribute. Ideally,
research would be codesigned to ensure its mutual
benefit to participants and researchers. Indeed, our
present study would have benefited from adhering
better to this guidance. We codesigned the study
with CFPAC and communicated the results back
to them for their practical use. However, we did
not have funding to compensate participants in the
study, and this likely influenced who was able to
take part. We endeavor to follow this guidance in
all of our future work and encourage other
researchers to do the same.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted food systems
at multiple scales resulting in hunger, increased
food insecurity, and loss of livelihoods, among
other impacts. In the Chicago region, the CFPAC-
facilitated Rapid Response Effort strengthened
and expanded collaborative networks across food
system sectors and geographic communities to
enable swift actions addressing immediate crises,
such as emergency food and PPE distribution.
Our analysis across 10 narratives about the Rapid
Response Effort illustrates the importance of
collaborative networks in not only responding to
food system disruptions directly and through
policy advocacy, but also building a foundation for
longer-term, systemic change. As working groups
sought to address the external challenges caused
by the pandemic, internal challenges arose due to
dynamics of privilege and oppression related to
racial identities. Conversation circles intentionally
designed for white-identifying participants to learn
about white supremacy and engage in self-
reflection helped to re-center racial equity in
alignment with CFPAC's mission but have not
entirely resolved power disparities. Future
research on collaborative networks in food
systems should attend to power dynamics related
to race and social equity. Developing equitable,
non-extractive partnerships holds exciting
potential for creating local-level solutions that
reimagine and transform the neoliberal food sys-
tem. Food researchers and scholars need to
engage more with communities of color as a part

of the solution to this issue. Some suggestions for researchers and scholars are creating lasting ties with BIPOC communities, more participatory research involving indigenous or local knowledge methodologies, and financial or other forms of compensation for taking part in a study.

Acknowledgments

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