

[COVID Information Commons \(CIC\) Research Lightning Talk](#)

[Transcript of a Presentation by Tracy Van Holt \(New York University\), January 13, 2021](#)



Title: [RAPID Collaborative: Networks and Spatial Dynamics of the US Food Supply Chain amid the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[Tracy Van Holt CIC Profile](#)

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Transcript Editor: Macy Moujabber

Transcript

Tracy Van Holt:

Slide 1

So we're back to some of the food supply issues.

Slide 2

First, I just want to thank our team, project team across New York University, University of Florida, and Arizona State and National Science Foundation for this work. So we're a team of, you know, geographers, cultural anthropologists, and supply chain experts.

Slide 3

So of course we're- we've all seen the news. When the pandemic hit, there were news reports of you know discarded products, and part of this really highlighted a couple of things about our food supply chain. One, this is a picture of tomatoes. And tomatoes in the U.S. basically are for the restaurant supply networks, but tomatoes for supermarkets essentially come from Mexico, and this is according to my colleague who works with tomato farmers down in Florida. And so the- our supply chain was really designed for efficiency in the restaurant and supermarket network, and what we're seeing as all the restaurants are closing is that the system is collapsing in many ways. So, you know, restaurants now of course don't have as many customers, but they're still struggling to get products at the same quality and

price. And they've also had to adjust their business models as we know for social distancing etc., So this work is really looking at the pivotal role that supply network- restaurant supply networks- really play in the food system.

Slide 4

We're focusing on independent restaurants. They're really important in our economy, you know, small businesses - there are 500,000 small businesses that are small restaurants, 11 million people are directly employed, and 5 million people in the supply chain. And a lot of small scale farms are also supplying these restaurants. And they're facing different sets of operational challenges than larger franchises and larger businesses, so this is why we focused on them.

Slide 5

So our focus is really to understand the vulnerabilities in the supply chain as well as in restaurants and how they are adapting and responding. So a couple of questions we're addressing is: what are the strategies that restaurants are using to adapt? And does their relationship with not only their suppliers but other restaurants help them? Because there is very much a restaurant community. And finally how has the supply chain shifted?

Slide 6

So we're working across our three sites. One is in New York in Queens and in Manhattan. We're also focused on Maricopa County and Gainesville, Florida. So as the pandemic has unfolded, of course, COVID which was once a hot spot in New York is now a hot spot in some of the other places. So it really works for a rich research.

Slide 7

Some of our methodological advances in supply chain research is: one, it's really- there's not a lot of focus on spatial analysis for comp- adding that component where we've designed our research that's Zoom friendly but based on ethnographies. And finally, social networks- even though supply chains are networks, there's a paucity of information on supply networks.

Slide 8

And so specifically the vertical networks, the supply chain, as well as the horizontal networks, the restaurants. So this is, you know, one of our contributions.

Slide 9

I'm just gonna show from some of our semi-structured interviews with the restaurant owners at the beginning. We've coded for these interviews and basically I'm gonna show you a visualization of the themes.

Slide 10

And so what you're looking at here- don't be afraid by this pretty figure here- are all of the words that were- that restaurant owners were talking about. And we see two really big divisions on the right hand side. There's really focus on supply chain issues, distribution, relationships with suppliers, alcohol sales, drivers taking other routes, competition with other chains. And on the left hand side these are really operational issues. So it's: how is the restaurant pivoting? How are they finding- you know keeping their staff safe with mask wearing? How are they- you know a lot of their employees have left so how are they handling this? And finally just on the bottom, you could see a lot of this pivoting- pivoting to takeout- french fries don't travel well, as we all know. So there's a lot of food that has been designed for restaurants in one way that now that they've had to pivot, you know, has an effect on everything else.

Slide 11

If we just focus on the main themes in all of these, it really boils down to a couple of topics in our interviews we're conducting now or focusing on this. Again this is like zooming into the most prominent themes. On the right hand side, it's really about distribution and planning and supply chains. Supplies are not providing the products at the same intervals as they were in the past, even if they are available. And then really on the left hand side the COVID risk to staff is a big issue for the restaurant owners, getting their clients to wear masks when they're not eating, and then we see this sort of intermediary in terms of pivoting their business model and pivoting to takeout.

Slide 12

So just in conclusion, you know there's a lot of factors that are contributing to restaurant outcomes and we hope that this research will inform not only information on strengthening some of our components of the supply chain but also develop resilience to the future.

Slide 13

And finally, if you want to reach out to us, either me or any of our team mentors feel free to do so and to learn more you can see our website. Thanks so much.