

Racial or social equity framework use among food policy councils and associations with councils' COVID-19 responses

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Abstract

Food policy councils (FPCs) play a critical role in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 in their communities. This study examines the characteristics of councils that use, develop, or do not use racial or social equity frameworks, and explores how framework use relates to COVID-19 responses and part-


nerships. Survey data represent 193 FPCs across the United States. Survey questions addressed the following: (a) use of a racial or social equity framework; (b) demographic information (e.g., geographical focus, organization type, U.S. region); (c) budget and funding, connection/partnership, groups supported, food policy priorities; and (d) COVID-related actions. Means, chi-square tests, and anal-

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ysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to describe the association among these factors and FPCs' racial equity framework use. Results indicated that 38% of FPCs use a racial or social equity framework to guide their work. Having a full-time position was the only variable significantly associated with using a racial or social framework. FPCs that use a racial equity framework reported more policy work (e.g., raising funds with community partners, advocating for community food system policies) and were more likely to work with Black, Latinx, and people with disabilities than councils that did not report using a framework. Furthermore, councils using a racial or social equity framework reported policy priorities related to healthy food access and local food processing and have connections with state-elected officials and social justice groups. Integrating full-time positions dedicated to advancing racial and social equity efforts in food policy councils can enhance policy advocacy, strengthen community partnerships, and may increase engagement with marginalized groups such as Black, Latinx, and people with disabilities.

Keywords

food policy council, COVID-19, food policy, health equity, organizational policy, social justice, access to healthy foods

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Introduction

Food policy councils (FPCs) and other cross-sector collaborations have the potential to promote equity in the food system by building strong relationships with community members, implementing interventions that build on local strengths, and focusing on issues related to justice (Gertel-Rosenberg et al., 2022; Purifoy, 2014). FPCs are groups of individuals and organizations from multiple sectors in the food system that work toward a shared vision through policy, programming, and relationship-building (Burgan et al., 2022). FPCs can implement strategies that target both internal operations and community-facing activities that are designed to promote equity in their food system, such as including equity statements in their guiding principles, community engagement in decision-making processes, and working to increase land access for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities (see Appendix A). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many councils proactively addressed inequities exacerbated by the public health crisis (Palmer et al., 2020; Santo et al., 2021).

One effective approach for increasing the likelihood that FPCs' actions promote equity in the communities they serve is to adopt a racial or social equity framework that guides their decision-making. A racial equity framework is a way to organize and define a structured set of concepts to systematically inform and evaluate racial equity in an organization or a system. For example, the

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Racial Equity and Policy framework (REAP) developed by the Commonwealth Fund is a tool that applies a racial equity lens and focuses on how the policy process and environment affect racial equity. It emphasizes critical areas such as disproportionality (who benefits or is harmed), decentralization (who holds decision-making power), and voice (who is included or excluded). These factors are essential for examining racial equity within a specific policy context. The framework encourages a systems-level analysis that attends to institutions, actors, networks, contexts, and ideas, thereby filling gaps in traditional policy analysis by embedding racial equity explicitly in policy design, evaluation, and advocacy (McLoughlin, et al 2024; Michener, 2022). Dundore's Racial Equity Tools for Food Systems Planning is another framework designed specifically for the food system. It addresses racism during built and food environment planning processes and operationalizes how to promote racial equity through the planning process (Dundore, 2017). The framework prioritizes equity from the outset and emphasizes empowering marginalized communities in decision-making. It also underscores the importance of community engagement, historical context, and power dynamics within food systems. In addition to the term "racial equity framework," groups might adopt a racial equity lens, tool, set of principles, or other strategy that serves a similar purpose of providing language and concepts to encourage actions promoting equity. For example, the concepts of food justice, food sovereignty, and food apartheid are commonly used to critique structural inequities in the food system and to guide equitable food system transformation. These tools help communities and organizations frame their work around historical injustices, power imbalances, and community self-determination (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Beyond the Buzzwords. n.d.; Patel, 2009).

Given the important role that FPCs play in influencing decisions related to food access, justice, and sustainability in their communities (Palmer et al., 2020; Santo et al., 2021), understanding how these councils use racial or social equity frameworks and their shared characteristics can help identify effective approaches to promote fairness

and inclusion in local food systems. This knowledge can also guide policymakers and practitioners in supporting and replicating successful equity-focused initiatives. A few studies have examined the use of racial or social equity frameworks among FPCs. One recent study's sub-analysis of FPCs using racial equity frameworks, conducted through social network analysis, found that these councils exhibited similar patterns in their partnerships and policy responses (Mui et al., 2024). However, little is known about how many FPCs use racial or social equity frameworks to guide their work and whether they share common characteristics beyond partnership. The objectives of this study are to document findings about racial or social equity framework use among a national sample of FPCs and to explore characteristics of councils that do use such frameworks, are developing a one, or do not use one. We also explore whether the use of a racial or social equity framework was associated with types of COVID-19 responses, including the types of groups that FPCs partnered with to implement responses, and the populations FPCs focused on for their COVID-19 response efforts, among our survey respondents.

Methods

Below, we outline the methods used to conduct this research, including the participants, survey, and quantitative analysis.

Participants

In 2020, the Food Policy Networks project at Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) invited 372 FPCs from across the U.S. to complete its biennial FPC census. From June to September 2020, the CLF received responses from 214 FPCs. The study is based on responses from 193 FPCs, including three FPCs in tribal nations (CLF, 2020) that provided information about their use of a racial or social framework. One member from each FPC was asked to complete the survey on behalf of the FPC. A link to the survey in Qualtrics was distributed via email to the primary contact for each FPC. Two attempts were made via a follow-up email and a phone call to reach FPCs that had yet to complete the survey. If available, the secondary contact was included in the follow-up email.

Survey

Since 2013, CLF has distributed a survey for FPCs every 12–18 months. In 2020, the survey focused on understanding how FPCs were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent across years, the survey asks for (a) demographic information (e.g., geographic focus, organization type, U.S. state, membership representation); and (b) annual budget and paid staff. Among these other questions, the 2020 survey specifically asked about FPCs' responses to COVID-19 (e.g., councils and government preparedness, actions taken, partner groups, populations supported by work, policy priorities and areas of policy work across government levels, advocacy actions, and challenges and accomplishments) and use of a racial or social equity framework or criteria in decision-making processes, posing the question: "Does your FPC use a racial or social equity framework or criteria when making decisions about its policy priorities or advocacy actions?" (see Appendix B for the full survey instrument). For the question on using a racial or social equity framework or criteria, the authors were generally interested in how FPCs supported individuals and groups to promote fairness and food access in their local food systems. Therefore, no strict structure or definition of a racial or social equity framework was provided in the questionnaire. The Johns Hopkins University Institutional Review Board deemed the research exempt from human subjects review.

Quantitative Analysis

The study team analyzed the data in SAS version 9.4. First, we provide descriptive information regarding the use of the racial or social equity framework and the demographic information of the FPCs using frequencies and means. Second, means, Chi square tests, and ANOVA were used to describe the association among the variables on demographics information, budget and funding expenditures, and FPCs' use of a racial or social equity framework. The significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

We describe the sample characteristics and results from our analysis below.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 193 FPC responses to the survey, 83% of councils are active, meaning that they are meeting regularly and working to advance the priorities of the council (Santo et al., 2021), 5% are in development or in the beginning stage of defining the council and its work, and 11% are in transition, meaning they are redefining the direction or purpose of the council or meeting less frequently because of reduced capacity. Thirty-seven percent of councils work at the county level; 19% are regional, meaning they focus their efforts across multiple counties or multiple states; 19% work at both the city and county levels; 12% focus on the city level; and 2% operate on Indigenous lands. About one-third (32%) of FPCs are located in the Midwest region, 23% in the following regions: Northeast, Southeast, and West. About half (48%) of the FPCs are housed in nonprofit organizations, 25% are embedded in government, and 20% are grassroots coalitions. The majority (65–93%) have membership representation from community members, anti-hunger groups, government staff, the food production sector, public health, cooperative extension, higher education, or the health care sector. The least represented sectors include philanthropy, youth, and elected officials at 23–29%. Forty percent of the FPCs responded that they have paid staff, 31% do not have paid staff, and the remainder did not provide a response. Of those with paid staff, the majority of the FPCs (64%) do not have a full-time-equivalent (FTE) position (0 FTE), 17% have less than one FTE, 17% have one to three FTE, and 6% have more than three FTE. Concerning annual budgets, about 29% of the FPCs do not have any budget, 34% have a budget of \$1–\$10,000, 11% have a budget of \$10,001–\$25,000, 15% have a budget of \$25,001–\$100,000, and 11% have a budget above \$100,000. (All values in this paper are in US\$.)

Council Characteristics Associated with the Use of Racial or Social Equity Frameworks

Among the FPCs surveyed, about one-third (38%) already use a racial or social equity framework, 43% are in the process of developing one, and 19% currently do not use a racial or social equity framework. Table 1 presents other characteristics of

Table 1. Characteristics of Food Policy Councils (FPCs) by Self-Reported Use of Racial or Social Equity Framework (N = 193) in the Food Policy Networks Project's Biennial Food Policy Councils Census, 2020

Variables	Yes	Developing	No (n, %) or (mean ± SD)	Total	p-value
Use of Racial or Social Equity Framework					
FPCs' status					
Active	60 (31.1)	71 (36.8)	32 (16.6)	163 (84.4)	0.86
In development	5 (2.3)	3 (1.5)	1 (0.5)	9 (4.7)	
In transition	8 (4.1)	9 (4.7)	4 (2.1)	21 (10.9)	
Geographic focus					
County	25 (13.0)	29 (15.0)	17 (8.8)	71 (36.8)	0.29
Region	14 (7.3)	13 (6.7)	11 (5.7)	38 (19.7)	
City/municipality	12 (6.2)	11 (5.7)	1 (0.5)	24 (12.4)	
Both city and county	16 (8.3)	17 (8.8)	4 (2.2)	37 (19.2)	
State	5 (2.3)	12 (6.2)	3 (1.6)	20 (10.4)	
Indigenous lands	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	3 (1.5)	
Region^b					
Mid-Atlantic	10 (5.2)	8 (4.1)	6 (3.1)	24 (12.4)	0.25
Mountain Plains	7 (3.6)	14 (7.2)	5 (2.6)	26 (13.5)	
Midwest	22 (11.4)	13 (6.7)	11 (5.7)	46 (23.8)	
Northeast	10 (5.2)	13 (6.7)	3 (1.6)	26 (13.5)	
Southeast	15 (7.8)	12 (6.2)	4 (2.1)	31 (16.1)	
Southwest	3 (1.6)	5 (2.6)	1 (0.5)	9 (4.7)	
West	6 (3.1)	18 (9.3)	7 (3.6)	31 (16.2)	
Organization type					
Embedded in government	21 (10.9)	21 (10.9)	6 (3.1)	48 (24.9)	0.66
Embedded in university	1 (0.5)	4 (2.1)	3 (1.6)	8 (4.1)	
Grassroots coalition	14 (7.3)	15 (7.8)	10 (5.2)	39 (20.2)	
Housed in nonprofit	26 (13.5)	27 (14.0)	12 (6.2)	65 (33.7)	
Nonprofit	11 (5.7)	14 (7.3)	5 (2.6)	20 (10.4)	
Other	0 (0.0)	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	3 (1.6)	
Number of sectors represented	8.1 ± 4.1	9.2 ± 3.8	9.8 ± 3.9		0.66
FPCs' Financial and Budget Information					
Full-time position					
0 FTE	2 (2.6)	6 (7.7)	6 (7.7)	14 (7.2)	0.03
>1 FTE	6 (7.7)	13 (16.7)	13 (16.7)	20 (10.4)	
1–3 FTE	12 (15.4)	9 (11.5)	9 (11.5)	30 (15.5)	
>3 FTE	11 (14.1)	10 (12.8)	10 (12.8)	31 (16.2)	
Paid staff					
Yes	31 (22.3)	38 (27.3)	9 (6.5)	78 (40.4)	0.11
No	23 (16.6)	23 (16.6)	15 (10.8)	58 (30.1)	
Funding budget (US\$)					
No funding	19 (9.9)	22 (11.4)	13 (6.8)	54 (28.0)	0.25
\$1–\$10,000	21 (10.9)	30 (15.6)	15 (7.8)	66 (33.3)	
\$10,001–\$25,000	6 (3.1)	10 (5.2)	5 (2.6)	21 (10.9)	
\$25,001–\$100,000	14 (7.3)	12 (6.3)	4 (2.1)	30 (15.5)	
Over \$100,000	12 (6.3)	9 (4.7)	0 (0.0)	21 (10.9)	

Note: Any differences in percentages are due to missing data. ^a Frequency and percentages shown only for FPCs that led these policy response actions, coordinated these policy changes, supported these groups, had these food system policy priorities, and had relationships with these entities. ^b Regions were based on U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (n.d.) categories.

FPCs by their use of a racial or social equity framework. Among the different variables characterizing FPCs, having a full-time position was the only variable that was significantly associated with using a racial or social framework ($p = 0.03$).

Comparing COVID-19 Responses Between Food Policy Councils and the Use of a Racial or Social Equity Framework

FPCs that use a racial or social equity framework reported more total COVID response actions

when compared to those who are developing or did not use a framework (14.0 ± 5.9 , 12.0 ± 6.0 , 9.4 ± 5.4 , respectively) (Table 2). There was a significant difference in the proportion of FPC by the use of a racial or social equity framework and COVID response actions, such as holding meetings with representatives from different sectors, raising funds with community partners, advocating for community food system policies, meeting with government staff or elected officials, and collaborating with a government official to provide fund-

Table 2. Food Policy Councils' (FPC) COVID-19-Related Actions and Responses by Self-Reported Use of Racial or Social Equity Framework (N = 193) in the Food Policy Networks Project's Biennial Food Policy Councils Census, 2020

Variables	Use of racial or social equity framework (n, %) or (mean \pm SD)			p-value
	Yes	Developing	No	
FPCs COVID response actions led or supported				
Created webpage	50 (25.9)	60 (31.1)	24 (12.4)	0.17
Created maps	62 (32.1)	51 (26.4)	18 (9.3)	0.17
Created dashboard	26 (13.5)	20 (10.4)	6 (3.2)	0.18
Used social media	60 (31.1)	65 (33.7)	28 (14.5)	0.72
Organized community meetings	53 (27.5)	54 (27.9)	17 (8.8)	0.07
Collected data	49 (25.4)	51 (26.4)	19 (9.8)	0.27
Holding regular meetings with sector representatives	60 (31.1)	58 (30.1)	20 (10.4)	0.03
Matched resources	64 (33.2)	65 (33.7)	27 (14.0)	0.23
Organized public education	62 (32.1)	61 (32.0)	34 (13.0)	0.15
Advocated for community food and farm systems policies	52 (26.9)	62 (32.1)	17 (8.9)	0.03
Met with government staff/elected officials	54 (28.0)	53 (27.5)	13 (6.7)	0.001
Collaborated with a government official to provide funding	48 (25.0)	39 (20.3)	9 (4.7)	0.03
Raised funds with community partners	60 (31.1)	50 (25.9)	14 (7.3)	0.02
Total COVID response actions led or supported	14.0 \pm 5.9	12.0 \pm 6.0	9.4 \pm 5.4	0.0004
Policy efforts during COVID				
Emergency food	54 (28.0)	55 (28.5)	21 (10.9)	0.28
Food producer	44 (22.8)	46 (23.8)	21 (10.9)	0.34
Food chain	27 (14.0)	25 (13.0)	7 (3.6)	0.07
Direct marketing	56 (29.0)	51 (26.4)	22 (11.4)	0.06
Food assistance	52 (26.9)	47 (24.3)	17 (8.8)	0.01
Child nutrition	50 (25.9)	43 (22.3)	16 (8.3)	0.01
Food processing	35 (18.1)	33 (17.1)	13 (6.7)	0.24
Food procurement	43 (22.3)	32 (16.6)	17 (8.8)	0.01
Food safety	30 (15.5)	24 (12.4)	10 (5.2)	0.17
Restaurant	31 (16.1)	25 (13.0)	11 (5.7)	0.08
Retail	28 (14.5)	23 (11.9)	9 (4.6)	0.34
Institutions	41 (21.2)	31 (16.1)	12 (6.2)	0.01
Urban agriculture	29 (25.4)	43 (22.3)	16 (8.3)	0.03
Credit loan	18 (9.3)	20 (10.4)	3 (1.6)	0.05
Funding	45 (23.3)	34 (17.6)	14 (7.3)	0.01

Bold values in the table indicate actions or efforts that are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

ing. COVID-related policy efforts that showed significant differences between FPCs that do or do not use racial or social equity frameworks are policy efforts in the federal food and nutrition assistance program, food procurement, and urban agriculture. Other areas they helped to develop or advocate for policies were child nutrition, funding, and institutions. Table 2 presents detailed information about FPCs' COVID-related responses related to the use of a racial or social equity framework.

Comparing FPCs' Broader Responses and Use of a Racial or Social Equity Framework

Key differences were observed in policy work focused on specific populations including Black, Latinx, LGBTQ individuals, documented and undocumented immigrants, individuals with disabilities, English-as-a-second-language communities, and homeless individuals, based on FPCs use of equity frameworks. Among these councils using frameworks, 30.5% supported Black communities, 29.3% supported Latinx communities, and 21.4%

supported LGBTQ communities. Twenty-one percent and 22.5% supported undocumented and documented immigrants, respectively, and 25.3% supported both people with disabilities and English-as-a-second-language communities. Additionally, people who were experiencing homelessness were supported by 29.3% of FPCs utilizing a racial or social equity framework, and 32.3% of these FPCs supported unemployed individuals.

FPCs that use a framework are significantly more likely to prioritize policies related to healthy food access (28.0%) and local food processing (2.1%) compared with those that do not use or are in the process of developing a framework. Furthermore, these FPCs are significantly more likely to have connections with local (27.9%), state (17.4%), or federal (11.6%) elected officials, resident associations (23.6%), and social justice groups (27.5%) than those who do not use or are in the process of developing a framework. Table 3 presents more details about responding FPCs' broader activities related to the use of a racial or social equity framework.

Table 3. Food Policy Councils' (FPCs) Broader Actions and Responses by Self-Reported Use of Racial or Social Equity Framework (N = 193) in the Food Policy Networks Project's Biennial Food Policy Councils Census, 2020

Variables	Use of racial or social equity framework (n, %) or (mean ± SD)			p-value
	Yes	Developing	No	
Groups supported				
Farmworkers	44 (23.3)	40 (21.3)	16 (8.5)	0.27
Processing workers	27 (14.7)	29 (15.4)	11 (5.9)	0.84
Delivery distribution	31 (17.0)	25 (13.3)	9 (4.8)	0.19
Food retail workers	34 (18.3)	37 (20.0)	37 (20.0)	0.06
Food service workers	33 (17.7)	36 (19.3)	9 (4.8)	0.34
Seniors	52 (27.5)	55 (29.3)	23 (12.2)	0.89
Youths	64 (32.8)	70 (37.0)	25 (13.2)	0.11
Undocumented immigrants	39 (21.0)	38 (20.4)	10 (5.4)	0.04
Documented immigrants	42 (22.5)	44 (23.5)	11 (5.9)	0.02
Native Americans	30 (16.0)	32 (17.1)	10 (5.4)	0.42
Blacks	58 (30.5)	53 (29.0)	11 (5.9)	<0.0001
Asians	33 (17.7)	32 (17.2)	9 (4.9)	0.11
Latinx	55 (29.3)	56 (29.8)	11 (5.9)	<0.001
LGBTQ	40 (21.4)	32 (17.1)	6 (3.2)	<0.01
People with disabilities	47 (25.3)	40 (21.3)	13 (7.0)	0.01
English-as-second language	47 (25.3)	52 (27.5)	13 (7.0)	0.01
Low-income people	71 (37.2)	74 (38.8)	31 (17.0)	0.11

continued

Table 3 cont.

Variables	Use of racial or social equity framework (n, %) or (mean ± SD)			p-value
	Yes	Developing	No	
Homeless	55 (29.3)	44 (23.4)	19 (10.1)	0.01
Food insecure	70 (36.8)	76 (40.5)	32 (17.4)	0.46
Unemployed	61(32.3)	53 (28.1)	23 (12.2)	0.01
FPCs policy priorities				
Food procurement	12 (6.2)	12 (6.2)	9 (4.7)	0.41
Healthy food access	54 (28.0)	41 (21.1)	22 (11.4)	<0.01
Waste	7 (3.6)	12 (6.2)	6 (3.3)	0.53
Anti-hunger	42 (21.3)	46 (23.8)	14 (7.25)	0.12
Land use	12 (6.2)	12 (6.2)	2 (1.0)	0.26
Food production	23 (11.9)	31 (16.1)	15 (7.8)	0.60
Local food processing	4 (2.1)	13 (6.7)	10 (5.2)	<0.01
Food labor	3 (1.6)	8 (4.2)	1 (0.5)	0.22
Natural resources and environment	3 (1.6)	3 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	0.47
Economic development	24 (12.4)	28 (14.5)	7 (3.6)	0.23
Transportation and distribution	17 (8.8)	13 (6.7)	9 (4.7)	0.39
Connections and partnerships				
Residents' association	45 (23.6)	38 (19.9)	12 (6.3)	0.04
Higher education	54 (28.4)	53 (27.9)	17 (8.9)	0.06
Elementary	43 (22.6)	44 (23.2)	16 (8.4)	0.42
Financial institution	14 (7.4)	11 (5.8)	2 (1.1)	0.12
Assisted living	12 (6.3)	17 (9.0)	8 (4.2)	0.35
Social justice	52 (27.5)	45 (23.4)	8 (4.2)	<0.001
First responder	11 (5.9)	8 (4.3)	3 (1.6)	0.21
Healthcare	45 (23.7)	43 (22.6)	16 (8.4)	0.52
Correction facility	6 (3.2)	6 (3.2)	0 (0.0)	0.24
Supplier	31 (16.3)	29 (15.3)	11 (5.8)	0.33
Food chain	25 (13.2)	24 (12.6)	12 (6.3)	0.80
Producers	65 (34.2)	68 (35.8)	28 (14.7)	0.51
Food retail	51 (27.0)	45 (23.8)	21 (11.1)	0.31
Faith organization	51 (26.8)	50 (26.3)	23 (12.1)	0.32
Emergency	34 (17.8)	42 (22.0)	14 (7.3)	0.30
Public utilities	7 (3.7)	4 (2.1)	1 (0.5)	0.31
Federal elect	22 (11.6)	18 (9.5)	4 (2.1)	0.02
State elect	33 (17.4)	25 (13.2)	5 (2.6)	<0.01
Local elect	53 (27.9)	47 (24.7)	12 (6.3)	<0.01
Environmental sustainability	27 (14.3)	30 (15.9)	10 (5.3)	0.78
Agriculture	46 (24.2)	48 (25.3)	21 (11.1)	0.77
Police	12 (6.4)	8 (4.3)	2 (1.1)	0.23
Social services	52 (27.4)	56 (29.5)	24 (12.6)	0.34
Transport	21 (11.1)	20 (10.6)	5 (2.7)	0.50
School district	47 (24.7)	53 (27.9)	21 (11.1)	0.78
Park and recreation	25 (13.2)	23 (12.1)	7 (3.7)	0.26
Planning	33 (17.3)	36 (18.9)	12 (6.3)	0.17
Emergency	24 (17.8)	42 (22.0)	14 (7.3)	0.30

Bold values in the table indicate groups or priorities that are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

With about 81% of FPCs either developing or having a racial or social equity framework, our study found a trend toward FPCs integrating racial and social equity consideration in their policy and program work. However, FPCs using such frameworks are likely to have better organizational capacity and resources, including higher FTE, which plays an important role in their ability to adopt and implement equity-focused approaches. Additionally, we found that groups that use racial or social equity frameworks responded to the pandemic with more actions and policy efforts. These FPCs engaged with a broader set of constituents than groups that were developing a framework or did not yet have one, which helped inform their decision-making.

Our findings show that FPCs that have adopted racial or social equity frameworks are more active in policy change. This study contributes to the conversation about how FPCs advance racial equity. Since 1981, FPCs have increased in number, exhibiting diverse membership and scope across groups (Bassarab et al., 2019). FPCs have broadened from advancing and implementing local food policies and programs, such as zoning, urban agriculture, and education, to actively promoting equity within food systems (Cohen & Ilieva, 2020; Schiff et al., 2022). Strategies to promote equity should address the root causes of health disparities, such as structural racism, poverty, and other issues related to the social determinants of health (Cohen & Ilieva, 2020; Kelly et al., 2023; Schiff et al., 2022). Racial equity frameworks guide some of this work, such as the Center for Social Inclusion/Race Forward racial equity policy framework (Sands et al., 2018), Michigan's Good Food Charter (Pirog et al., 2015; Scalera et al., 2022), and the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII; n.d.) framework. Several case studies illustrate this work (Springfield Food Policy Council, n.d.). In New York City, for example, the Office of Food Policy is applying a wider racial equity and food justice lens to enhance access to federal programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and school meals, implement ethical food procurement guidelines such as with the Good Food Purchasing Program, increase wages,

improve working conditions, and support fair housing and education policies (Cohen & Ilieva, 2020). Similarly, FPCs are adopting a racial and social equity lens and framework to guide their work. A common feature of this shift is broader FPC leadership and membership that includes individuals experiencing food insecurity (Bain et al., 2021; Boden & Hoover, 2018). The survey results indicated that councils with a framework were more likely to support a range of groups at risk of experiencing food insecurity, including unhoused people, people with disabilities, and undocumented individuals. Racial and social frameworks may assist councils in identifying groups that may be more vulnerable to systemic shocks, such as a pandemic. It is important to note that the work of FPCs using frameworks reported upstream interventions, like policy work, and not solely one-time interventions, like bias-recognition training.

The findings underscore the critical role of partnership and support from both the government and interest groups in advancing racial equity work among FPCs. These councils can look to and/or partner with other cross-sector collaborations and approaches that center community voices and leadership to promote racial and health equity (Hays et al., 2000; Hilliard-Boone et al., 2022; Stamatakis et al., 2020). These efforts have created ways to improve children's health and infant mortality; increase healthy food consumption and physical activity; reduce body mass index; reduce homelessness; and reduce the use of emergency health care (Gertel-Rosenberg et al., 2022; Malawa et al., 2021; Mosley, 2021; Reno et al., 2021).

This study has strengths and limitations. It is the first analysis of FPC characteristics and COVID-19 responses associated with the reported use of a racial or social equity framework. The survey was administered by a well-known institution with strong ties to FPCs across the U.S., likely increasing survey response. One limitation is that there was no clear definition of a racial or social equity framework, so there may be variability in how FPCs respond to the question. Along those lines, more research is needed to identify racial and social equity frameworks used by FPCs, the strengths and weaknesses of various frameworks, and how frameworks influence FPC members and

their priorities and activities. While this study focused on FPCs' response and policy work during COVID-19, the findings also offer insight into how FPCs may operate in advancing racial equity outside of a crisis context. Because addressing systemic inequities in the food system requires intentional and sustained efforts beyond emergency response, future research should assess a broader impact of specific FPC-led policies and actions on racial, ethnic, and social groups, as well as the unique contributions FPCs make to equity efforts.

In addition to frameworks, some FPCs adopt values statements and asset language to guide their racial and social equity efforts. Our exploratory study did not control for variables such as FPC age or funding, so it is possible that some findings might be confounded by council characteristics or other contextual factors. (As an example, we found that FPCs that use a racial equity framework reported more COVID-19–related policy work, but those same FPCs might be more active or well-resourced in general.) We conducted multiple hypothesis tests to explore possible associations between framework use, FPC characteristics, and COVID-19 responses; however, more focused research is needed to confirm the associations detected in this analysis. Our results related to differences between what COVID-19–related responses councils focused on, who their partners are, and what populations they focused on show emerging associations with the use of racial or social equity frameworks. This suggests the need for further research on FPCs as mechanisms for promoting equity-oriented policy work.

Encouraging FPCs to adopt and use equity

frameworks could better position them to respond to crises, engage in meaningful policy work, and build robust relationships with key stakeholders. As such, it is imperative for stakeholders at all levels to collaborate and invest in the capacity of FPCs to promote racial and social equity effectively. This may not only enhance the overall effectiveness of FPCs but also ensure that the benefits of their work are equitably distributed across all communities. There continues to be a need to systematically assess the impact of policies and actions on various racial and ethnic groups. Understanding how FPC initiatives contribute to or mitigate disparities is crucial for refining and improving strategies to ensure equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

The use of an equity framework may signal that an organization already possesses the capacity and resources needed to engage in equity-focused work. However, to advance racial equity work effectively among FPCs, they may require targeted resources and support, including funding, training, and technical assistance to build this capacity. Establishing full-time positions in FPCs focused on advancing racial and social equity may strengthen advocacy, build community partnerships, and increase engagement with marginalized groups. Moreover, FPCs should not only aim to integrate equity into their outputs (e.g., policies), but also embed a clear equity framework that guides their processes, leadership, and structures, ensuring that racial equity functions as both a guiding principle and intended outcome of their work.

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Appendix A. Examples of Equity Promotion Strategies

Below are examples of equity-promotion strategies that food policy councils (FPCs) have implemented related to their internal operations and community-facing activities as provided in responses to the 2020 survey of FPCs.

Strategies for Promoting Equity	Example
<i>Internal operations</i>	
Including statements about racial equity in values and mission statements	<p>At Food Solutions New England, racial equity is embedded in a statement about their priority impact areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://foodsolutionsne.org/
Incorporating advisory boards or reserving membership positions for community partners of color	<p>Baltimore City Food Policy Initiative has a community advisory board called the Resident Food Equity Advisors, which is made up of residents in the city who reflect the sociodemographic and racial distribution of the city.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/resident-food-equity-advisors
Democratizing decision-making processes	<p>Detroit Food Policy Council offers multiple ways people can become council members to democratize decision-making and policymaking activities by the council.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://assets.ihsph.edu/clf/mod_clfResource/doc/Food%20Policy%20Councils%20Innovations.pdf • https://www.detroitfoodpc.org/
<i>Community-facing activities</i>	
Funding mechanisms or direct compensation for work done in the food system, particularly by Black and Indigenous people	<p>Cultivate Charlottesville Food Justice Network has a plan to work with the local city council to fund the Food Equity Initiative, a program dedicated to addressing the root causes of food insecurity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://cultivatecharlottesville.org/food-justice-network/
Opportunities to improve land access for Black and Indigenous farmers	<p>Zoo City Farm and Food Network advocated for land access and permitted use for Black people to grow food in neighborhoods historically and disproportionately impacted by food insecurity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://zoocityfood.org/
Membership compensation for community members	<p>Orange County Food Council (NC) pays community experts who have lived experience of food system injustices to be council members, specifically in food assessment. Members are recruited through relationships in the community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://assets.ihsph.edu/clf/mod_clfResource/doc/FPC%20Stipend%20Program%20Brief%202022-05-25.pdf • https://hpdp.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/976/2023/08/English_Full_Community-Food-Access-Report-1.pdf

Appendix B. Survey Instrument: Food Policy Councils' Responses to COVID-19

[Introduction] The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our food system, making problems worse for communities that already struggled to meet basic needs yet at the same time showing the resiliency of local food systems. Food policy councils (FPCs) are stepping in to play a key role in their communities' response to the pandemic. The Food Policy Networks project at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, wants to know how your FPCs is responding to COVID-19, what challenges you are facing, and what successes you have achieved. By taking in this survey, you are helping to show the value and impact that FPCs are making to address food systems needs in communities across the country. A summary report of findings from across all FPCs surveyed will be shared with you upon completion of the project.

We recognize that you and other members of your FPC are doing critical work at this time, and are extremely busy balancing work and family obligations. We greatly appreciate your effort to take this survey. The survey takes about 15-20 minutes to complete. You may save your responses and return anytime using the same device before JULY 9, 2020 to complete it. A copy of your responses to the survey will be available for download and emailed to you after you complete the survey.

We will ask you to fill out two rounds of surveys (maybe three depending on the course of the pandemic), over the next nine months to see how your FPC's work has evolved over time. The first round is the longest because it includes questions asking for basic information on your FPC. If you have previously filled out a survey from the FPN project about your FPC, most of these questions will look familiar to you. FPCs that fill out at least two rounds of surveys will be entered into a drawing for \$1,000. Eight (8) FPCs will be randomly selected to receive \$1,000.

Uncertain if your group is a food policy council (FPC)? We consider an FPC to be a group or network of residents, businesses, non-profit organizations, and government staff engaged or interested in food and farm issues that commit to working together to address issues across the food system, primarily through policy, at the local (city/municipality or county) or state level, or on Native American or indigenous lands. No matter if your group goes by another name, such as a food council, food systems alliance, or food justice initiative, if this definition describes your group, then this survey is for you!

*The following questions ask for basic information about the structure of your FPC and contact information for your FPC. * indicates that the question is required.*

1. Your Contact*:

- a. Name:
- b. Position with the FPC:
- c. Phone number:
- d. Email address:

2. Would you like to be added to the Food Policy Networks listserv?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Already subscribed

3. Official name of food policy council (FPC)*:

4. State/Territory*:

5. What is the current status of the FPC*?

- a. Active (meets in person or virtually multiple times a year) (*skip questions 6-7 and 17*)
- b. In development (formed within the last 12 months) (*skip questions 6-7*)
- c. In transition (meets infrequently in person or virtually, redefining the purpose and/or structure of the council) (*skip questions 6-7 and 17*)
- d. Inactive (*answer questions 6-7 only*)

6. When did the FPC become inactive?

7. If you want to share, please briefly describe what led the FPC to become inactive.

8. Are you the primary contact for the FPC?*

- a. Yes (*skip question 9*)
- b. No

9. FPC Primary Contact*

- a. Name:
- b. Email address:
- c. Phone number:

10. FPC Secondary Contact or FPC general email

- a. Name:
- b. Email address:
- c. Phone number:

11. The names, email addresses and phone numbers for the primary and secondary contacts will be made publicly available in the [Food Policy Networks online directory](#). Do you want to share this information?*

- a. Yes, both contacts
- b. Yes, primary contact only
- c. No

12. FPC Website:

13. FPC Facebook:

14. FPC Twitter:

15. FPC Instagram:

16. What is the geographic focus of the FPC*?

- a. Native American or Indigenous lands
- b. State/Territory
- c. County
- d. City/Municipality

- e. Both City/Municipality and County
- f. Neighborhood
- g. Region (multi-county or multi-state)

17. What year was the FPC formally formed?

18. What type of organization is the FPC? (select the option that best describes the FPC):

- a. Non-profit (e.g., certified 501(c)(3) or other 501(c) category)
- b. Housed in another non-profit (e.g., a non-profit serves as fiscal agent or FPC is a project of a non-profit)
- c. Grassroots coalition
- d. Embedded in government (e.g., staffed by city or county employee)
- e. Embedded in a university/college or Extension office
- f. Other (please specify): _____

19. Which statement(s) describes the FPC's connection to government? (choose all that apply):

- a. Government employees are members of the council or participate in the meetings.
- b. Members of the FPC are appointed by government officials.
- c. Elected officials serve as members of the FPC.
- d. Local, state or tribal government supports the FPC (e.g., in-kind donation of meeting space, staff support with research or data, provision of letter of support for a grant).
- e. FPC was created by legislation (e.g., county resolution, city bylaw or state/provincial act).
- f. Government seeks advice or recommendations from the FPC.
- g. Other (please explain): _____
- h. The FPC has no connection to government (select only if none of the above statements are selected).

20. Which of the following sectors are represented by the FPC's membership? (choose all that apply)

- a. Government agency staff
- b. Elected officials
- c. Anti-hunger/emergency food
- d. College/university/community college
- e. Cooperative Extension System
- f. Community
- g. Economic development
- h. Elementary and secondary education
- i. Faith-based organizations
- j. Workers or worker representatives (e.g., farm workers, waiters, labor unions)
- k. Food processing/distribution
- l. Food production (e.g., farming, ranching, aquaculture)
- m. Food retail
- n. Food waste/disposal
- o. Health care
- p. Natural resources and environment

- q. Philanthropy
- r. Public health
- s. Social justice
- t. Youth

21. What was the FPC's approximate annual budget for the last fiscal year? [US\$]

- a. \$0
- b. \$1–\$10,000
- c. \$10,000–\$25,000
- d. \$25,000–\$100,000
- e. Over \$100,000

22. Does the FPC have paid staff?

- a. Yes (*answer question 23*)
- b. No (*skip question 23*)

23. How many paid full-time equivalents (FTE) does the FPC have?

The following questions ask about the work of your FPC in response to COVID-19.

Note for questions about policy: Our definition of policy is broad. It includes laws and ordinances; how policies get administered, funded, or implemented at local, state, tribal, or federal levels of government; as well as changes in policies and standards within institutions like schools, hospitals, government agencies, and private companies. Policy work could include working directly to change these various policies, as well as educating or coordinating others who might be advocating for such policies.

24. How would you describe the role of your FPC during the COVID-19 pandemic in one to two sentences?

25. In the past 5 years, has your community experienced an event (e.g., snowstorm, flood, uprising), not including the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent demonstrations against policy brutality and racial injustice, that significantly disrupted food access and availability in your city?

- a. Yes
- b. No (*skip question 26*)
- c. I don't know (*skip question 26*)

26. If yes, what event(s) disrupted food access and availability in your community?

27. How prepared was your FPC to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a. Don't know
- b. Not at all
- c. Slightly
- d. Moderately
- e. Very
- f. Extremely

28. How prepared was your local government to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in your community? If your FPC works at the state level, please respond for your state government.

- a. Don't know
- b. Not at all
- c. Slightly
- d. Moderately
- e. Very
- f. Extremely

29. What actions has your FPC taken in response to COVID-19?

Action	Our FPC led this effort	Our FPC supported another organization's efforts	Our FPC has not taken action in this area
Created a publicly accessible webpage with food systems information (e.g., resources, services) related to COVID-19			
Created a map of food systems resources available in response to COVID-19			
Created a dashboard to track food systems related trends in response to COVID-19			
Used social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) to share real-time information about the status of food systems resources during COVID-19			
Held community meeting(s) related to COVID-19			
Collected data related to food and farm systems needs due to COVID-19			
Held regular meetings between food systems sector representatives about responses to COVID-19			
Facilitated connections across food systems sectors to match resources with needs to respond to COVID-19			
Educated the public about food systems challenges due to COVID-19			
Advocated for local, state, tribal or federal policies related to community food and farm systems concerns due to COVID-19			
Met with government staff and/or elected officials to discuss food systems issues related to COVID-19			
Worked with government staff and/or elected officials to provide funding for needed food systems services in response to COVID-19			
Worked with community partners to raise funds for needed food systems services in response to COVID-19			

30. Please describe other actions your FPC has taken in response to COVID-19 that were not listed in the chart above:

31. Does your FPC work with any of the following organizations, agencies or people on food systems concerns related to COVID-19?

Organization	FPC previously worked with group and is currently working with group	New relationship for FPC	FPC previously worked with group but is NOT currently working with group	No relationship with group
Government agency - Emergency management services				
Government agency - Planning department				
Government agency - Parks and recreation department				
Government agency - School district				
Government agency - Transportation department				
Government agency - Health and human or social services				
Government agency - Police department				
Government agency - Agriculture				
Government agency - Environment or Sustainability				
Local elected official's office (e.g., mayor, city council, county commission)				
State elected official's office (e.g., governor, state representative or senator)				
Federal elected official's office (e.g., staff member or aide for Senator or Representative)				
Public utilities				
Emergency food providers (e.g., food bank, food pantry, hot meal provider)				
Faith-based organizations				
Restaurants				
Food retail stores (e.g., grocery or convenience stores, cooperative markets)				
Producers or direct markets for producers (e.g., farmers, ranchers, watermen, farmers markets, CSAs, farm bureau, farmer cooperatives)				
Food chain workers (e.g., labor unions or collectives)				
Food processors, distributors or suppliers (e.g., truck drivers, meat processing facilities)				
Correctional facilities				

Healthcare providers (e.g., hospitals, community clinics)				
Frontline healthcare workers and first responders (i.e., EMTs)				
Social justice or civil rights advocacy groups				
Assisted living facilities and nursing homes				
Banks, financial institutions or loan services				
Elementary and secondary schools				
Colleges, universities or community colleges				
Residents or neighborhood associations				

32. Please describe any other organizations, agencies or people that your FPC has worked with to address food systems concerns related to COVID-19 that were not listed in the chart above:

33. Has your FPC worked to support any of the following populations?

Population	FPC supported prior to COVID	New population that FPC is supporting due to COVID	FPC has not supported
Farmworkers			
Food processing workers			
Food delivery or distribution workers (i.e. truck drivers)			
Food service workers			
Seniors			
Children or youth			
Undocumented immigrants			
Legal immigrants and refugees			
American Indians, Native Americans or Alaska Natives			
Black people or people of African heritage			
People of Asian heritage			
Latinx people			
LGBTQ individuals			
People with disabilities			
People for whom English is a second language			
People with low literacy			
Low-income individuals or families			
People experiencing homelessness			
People experiencing food insecurity			
Individuals or households that receive federal food and nutrition assistance (e.g., SNAP, WIC, FDIPIR)			
Individuals or households experiencing unemployment or are furloughed			

34. What are the top three (3) POLICY priorities of the FPC in light of COVID-19?

- a. Food procurement (e.g., farm to school, institution or hospital)
- b. Healthy food access (e.g., healthy food financing, food and nutrition incentives at farmers markets, school wellness policies)
- c. Food waste reduction and recovery (e.g., tax incentive for food donations, date labeling, food waste recycling)
- d. Anti-hunger/anti-poverty (e.g., outreach and enrollment for SNAP and other federal social assistance programs, food banks, summer feeding programs, senior hunger, poverty reduction)
- e. Land use planning (e.g., urban agriculture zoning, comprehensive planning, farmland protection)
- f. Food production (e.g., farming, ranching, aquaculture, gardening, beekeeping)
- g. Local food processing (e.g., cottage food industry, community kitchens, local slaughter)
- h. Food labor (e.g., minimum wage standards, sick leave, working conditions)
- i. Natural resources and environment (e.g., water, climate change, soil quality, pesticide regulation)
- j. Economic development (e.g., food hubs, local food business promotion, food and farm financing)
- k. Transportation and distribution (e.g., access to healthy food retail, last-mile food distribution from wholesale suppliers to consumer food retailers)
- l. Other (*please explain*): _____
- m. Policy priorities not determined (only select if none of the above options selected)

35. Does your FPC use a racial or social equity framework or criteria when making decisions about its policy priorities or advocacy actions?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Developing criteria or framework

36. Which areas and at what level of government has your FPC helped to develop or advocated for policies in response to COVID-19, either directly or by supporting efforts led by another organization?

Policy Area	Level of government					Did not work on policy changes in this issue area
	Institutional	Local	State	Tribal	Federal	
Emergency food providers (e.g., food banks, pantries)						
Food producers (e.g., farmers, ranchers, watermen)						
Food chain workers and other essential workers (e.g., farmworkers, processing workers, food service workers)						
Direct markets for local producers (e.g., farmers markets, farm stands or CSAs)						
Federal food and nutrition assistance programs						
Federal child nutrition programs (e.g., school meals, summer meals, WIC, SNAP)						
Food processing and distribution						
Food procurement						
Food safety						

Restaurants and food service establishments						
Food retail stores						
Institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, jails)						
Urban agriculture or community gardens						
Access to credit or Small Business Administration loan programs						
Funding for critical food systems needs						

37. Please describe other areas that your FPC has helped to develop or advocated for policies in response to COVID that were not listed in the chart above:

38. What advocacy actions has your FPC taken in response to COVID-19?

- a. Provided policy recommendations to policy makers
- b. Supported or directed a campaign to advocate for a specific policy change
- c. Submitted written testimony
- d. Submitted comments on regulatory changes
- e. Provided oral testimony
- f. Met with policy makers
- g. Made calls to policy makers
- h. Reviewed and commented on draft legislation
- i. Supported a partner organization's policy agenda by signing onto a letter or providing testimony
- j. Surveyed policymakers about food system issue(s)
- k. Educated public about policy issues or candidates
- l. Hosted candidate forum
- m. Provide analysis or research on specific legislation
- n. Other (please explain): _____
- o. None (only select if none of the above options selected)

39. Briefly describe the results of your policy efforts.

40. What factors are influencing the priorities and actions of the FPC in response to COVID-19 (e.g., new developments, resources, funding, events, partnerships, etc.)?

41. How have the recent demonstrations against police brutality and racial impacted your FPCs response to COVID-19?

42. What have been the greatest challenges for your FPC in responding to COVID-19?

43. Describe the accomplishments of your FPC in addressing COVID-19.

44. What does your FPC need to help with its response to COVID-19 (e.g., tools, training, resources, etc.)?