

# Impact of COVID-19 on Restaurants in Durham, North Carolina

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*Bridging to Better Policy*

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Bull McCabes is an Irish pub located at historic five points in downtown Durham.  
Photo: [Discoverdurham.com](http://Discoverdurham.com)

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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic affected industries where indoor person-to-person contact is the norm. This study documents the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic-related government restrictions on the Durham, North Carolina restaurant industry by late summer of 2020. Sixty-four restaurant businesses in Durham, North Carolina participated in the survey between June-September 2020. Participating restaurants were mainly locally-owned businesses. The survey captured the type of restaurants (e.g. range of annual sales, ownership, etc.); the impact of COVID-19 on sales, employees, supply chains; support needed by the restaurant industry; and additional commentary in order to give space to elaborate.

## Key Takeaways

- More than 70% of the surveyed Durham restaurants lost at least half of their typical revenue by the end of summer 2020.
- A majority (71%) of restaurants had to lay off employees, and 87% had to reduce employee hours.
- Despite the COVID-19 health crisis, 70% of restaurant owners could not or did not provide paid sick leave to their employees.
- Supply chain disruptions affected 87% of the restaurants. Durham restaurants reported experiencing low supply and delays in delivery of many foodstuffs, such as beef, chicken, cheese, and fish, as well as an increase in prices.

- Restaurant owners voiced their need for financial support (rent abatement, payroll support, and loan forgiveness) as well as different modes of governmental involvement; some wanted additional guidance and supervision, while others preferred no government interference.
- Respondents reported that if the economic situation continued in the same way for more than one year (25%), more than six months (53%) or more than a couple months (22%) - they would not be able to keep their business from permanently closing--despite the availability of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) resources

This was a cross-sectional study and by its nature only able to capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Durham restaurant industry at a point in time. Further studies are needed to show the level of revenue, employment, business loss; as well as the resilience of the industry at the late stages of the pandemic and beyond.

TEMPORARILY  
CLOSED

COVID-19

# Introduction

Restaurants are a critical part of local economies of cities and surrounding rural areas. They connect communities and neighborhoods while providing an environment for families, friends, and colleagues to congregate for food and socialization. However, during the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the globe and governments tried to grapple with this novel virus. Close proximity of people to each other in enclosed spaces was the main driver of this respiratory infectious disease according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020). As a result, national and local governments enacted policies about limiting indoor in-person contact to curb the spread of COVID-19, which severely impacted the restaurant industry (Dube et al., 2020).

Compared to April 2019, US spending on food away from home dropped from \$71 billion to \$36 billion in April 2020. As states started opening back up, spending on food away from home rose to \$54 billion in June 2020 compared to \$74 billion in June 2019 (ERS, 2020). This represents a tremendous financial loss for the establishments providing food away from home, such as restaurants, cafeterias, etc. Due to financial loss in addition to safety concerns, more than 110,000 restaurants had closed their doors by December 2020 (NRA, 2021). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment in the restaurant industry jumped from 5.7% in February 2019 to 35.4% in April 2020, and still had not recovered by December 2020 at 16.1% (BLS, 2021).

Over the past ten years, Durham, North Carolina became known as the 'Foodie Capital of the South' (NYP, 2016). In 2020, the metropolitan area of Durham-Chapel Hill employed 20,670 people in the food preparation and serving related industries (BLS, 2020). For a city known for its food



Durham's historic Brightleaf Square occupies the former Watts and Yuille tobacco warehouses, and is now home to restaurants and shops. Photo: Istockphoto.com

scene and being a source of income of many of its residents, the impact of COVID-19 on restaurants merits exploration as both a service industry and employer.

In March 2020, in response to the health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Durham declared a stay-at-home order following the state of North Carolina's order. The stay-at-home order meant restaurants could only serve food off-premises in the form of delivery, take-out, or curbside pick-up.

In June 2020, the city transitioned to a "safer-at-home order," which meant they could have customers indoors with a 10-person limit. Later, the state amended the "safer-at-home" order and limited the number of customers to 6 people (City of Durham, 2020).

This study collected responses during the three months following the amendment of safer-at-home policies. Capturing the impact of pandemic responses can guide development of future national, state and local policies to help sustain restaurant operations and preserve employment in this sector.

# Methods

## Survey design and participants

This was a cross-sectional study conducted to measure the effects of COVID-19 on the restaurant industry in Durham following the second amendment of safer-at-home policies. We collected survey responses between June 11 and September 9, 2020. Durham restaurant addresses (n =646) were gathered in a previous study (Graves et al., 2021). To recruit restaurants for this survey, we mailed an invitation postcard to each restaurant. The postcard featured a link to the study website with more information about the study, access to the survey, a QR code to access the study, and a text-to-join service to direct potential participants to the online survey link. In addition to the mailed invitations, we also shared the survey information via manually gathered e-mail addresses, newsletters, and through personal blogs of the people in the field.

The survey was designed in and conducted via the web-based Qualtrics software and contained both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey questions probed the following: understanding the types of restaurants (e.g. range of annual sales, ownership, etc.); the impact of COVID-19 on sales, employees, supply chains; support needed by the restaurant industry; and additional commentary in order to give space to elaborate. Only owners/managers of Durham restaurants, or the employees of such restaurants were eligible to participate in the study. The survey branched into two sections for data collection from single-business owners and multiple-business owners. Owners of multiple businesses were able to provide information specific to each individual business and answer questions applicable to all of them. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

The institutional review board of Duke University approved the protocol for this study.

## Response rate

We mailed the postcard invitation for survey participation to 646 restaurants in Durham, North Carolina. However, 90 of the invitations were returned, indicating these restaurants did not receive the invitations via mail, possibly due to closures or having different mailing addresses. Thus, 556 was the final sample number of businesses that received the invitations. There were 146 survey entries, 27 of which did not consent to participate in the study and 55 of which were not eligible to participate. After 5 respondents quit the survey prematurely, we had 64 valid survey respondents. These 64 responses included one restaurant employee, 40 single/individual-business owner/managers, and 18 multiple-business owner/managers. Multiple business owners were asked to specify the number of restaurants they own/manage. When summed, multiple-business owners represented 51 individual restaurants. In total, we collected information about 91 restaurants, resulting in a response rate of 16% of the study. According to Survey Sampling, Inc. company's experience with more than 600 online surveys, typical online survey response rates range between 3 and 8% (Jeong et al., 2003).

## Data analysis

Quantitative data was cleaned and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and R Programming. The questions were standardized to create uniform variables among singular and multiple business owners. Instead of list-wise or pair-wise deletion, missing values were reported as unspecified. Descriptive analysis was performed for all variables. Frequency and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. Responses to the open-ended questions in direct quotes are provided to support a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on restaurant businesses.

# Results

## Restaurant characteristics

Table 1 summarizes restaurant characteristics (type, ownership, ethnic cuisine, and annual sales range pre-pandemic) for single business owners/managers, multiple business owners, and for all respondents in total. To describe restaurant type, we provided five options with descriptions. Restaurant category options:

1. Coffeeshop/dessert parlor;
2. Fast Food (does not offer full-table service and require minimal in-house meal preparation);
3. Fast Casual (does not offer full-table service and require more in-house meal preparation);
4. Casual dining (offers full-table service with a casual atmosphere); and
5. Fine dining (offer full-table service and the atmosphere is more formal).

The majority of restaurants represented were either casual dining (40%) or fast casual (35%), with a small number of coffeeshop/dessert parlors (8%) and fine-dining restaurants (4%). Further, (13%) of survey respondents did not specify the type of restaurant.

The majority of the restaurants in the survey (77%) were locally-owned. Approximately half of the restaurants identified as ethnic (e.g. Indian, Greek, Chinese, etc.). When asked about the annual sales prior to COVID-19 pandemic, 29% reported annual sales over \$1M, 19% between \$600K-\$999K, 9% between \$300K-\$599K, 7% had sales less than \$300K, and 36% chose not to disclose annual sales.

## Impact on restaurant operations and sales

We launched the survey right after the city of Durham moved from stay-at-home orders (only allowed to do take-out/delivery) to safer-at-home orders (allowed to serve customers at limited capacity with safety measures). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental policies related to it on Durham restaurant operations and sales are summarized in Table 2. About 30% of the restaurants who responded to the survey said they closed their doors either temporarily or permanently. When asked to elaborate on the decision to close their restaurants, these owners/managers primarily identified three reasons: keeping their staff and customers safe during COVID-19, restrictive government policies and regulations, and financial reasons (e.g. not enough sales and/or too much debt).

About half of Durham restaurants that stayed open offered one or several of the following additional services: donating meals; selling groceries; setting-up curbside pick-up; adding new to-go items, such as family meals or meals to-be-reheated at home; as well as adding online-ordering options. Some restaurants noted that pivoting to curbside pick-up orders was a big change for them. A small number of survey participants reported their businesses were not impacted by COVID-19 and related policies. However, the majority of restaurants experienced a large, negative impact on sales. Restaurants that had to close down, naturally, lost all of their sales. Among the ones that remained open, 35% reported more than a 75% decline in restaurant sales. Another 35% of restaurants reported a drop in sales between 50% and 75%. In aggregate, more than 70% of all restaurants owners estimated they lost at least half of their revenue.

Further, 71% of the restaurant owners/managers reported having to lay off their employees. A majority of owners (54%) reported laying off at least five or more of their employees. Some restaurants (22%) were able to retain all of their employees despite the drop in sales.



**Table 1. The restaurant characteristics of single-businesses owner/managers, multiple-business owners, displayed as frequency (percentage) format**

<b>Restaurant characteristic</b>	<b>Single businesses</b>	<b>Multiple businesses</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Type of restaurant</b>	n=40	n=51	n=91
Coffeeshop / dessert parlor	3 (7.5%)	4 (7.8%)	7 (7.7%)
Fast food	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Fast casual	11 (27.5%)	21 (41.2%)	32 (35.2%)
Casual dining	22 (55%)	14 (27.5%)	36 (39.6%)
Fine dining	2 (5%)	2 (3.9%)	4 (4.4%)
Unspecified	2 (5%)	10 (19.6%)	12 (13.2%)
<b>Ownership</b>			
Locally-owned	32 (80%)	38 (74.5%)	70 (76.9%)
Franchise	4 (10%)	6 (11.8%)	10 (11%)
Chain	1 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.1%)
Unspecified	3 (7.5%)	7 (13.7%)	10 (11%)
<b>Ethnic cuisine</b>			
Yes	15 (37.5%)	18 (35.3%)	33 (36.3%)
No	24 (60%)	23 (45.1%)	47 (51.6%)
Unspecified	1(2.5%)	10 (19.6%)	11 (12.1%)
<b>Range of annual sales</b>			
Less than \$300K	3 (7.5%)	4 (7.8%)	7 (7.7%)
Between \$300K - \$599K	3 (7.5%)	5 (9.8%)	8 (8.8%)
Between \$600K - \$999K	11 (27.5%)	6 (11.8%)	17 (18.7%)
More than \$1M	19 (47.5%)	7 (13.7%)	26 (28.6%)
Unspecified	4 (10%)	29 (56.9%)	33 (36.3%)

**Table 2. The impact of COVID-19 on the restaurants of single-business owner/managers, multiple-business owners and total frequency and (percentage)**

<b>Impact of COVID-19</b>	<b>Single businesses</b>	<b>Multiple businesses</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Status of the restaurants</b>	n=40	n=51	n=91
<b>Closed</b>			26 (28.6%)
<b>Permanently</b>	8 (20%)	14 (27.5%)	22 (24.2%)
<b>Temporarily</b>	2 (5%)	2 (3.9%)	4 (4.4%)
<b>Open</b>			65 (71.4%)
<b>Take-out/delivery only</b>	9 (23%)	14 (27.5%)	23 (25.3%)
<b>Social distancing rules</b>	21 (53%)	17 (33.3%)	38 (41.8%)
<b>Not disclosed</b>	0 (0%)	7.8 (4%)	4 (4.4%)
<b>Number of lay-offs</b>	n=40	n=51	n=91
<b>None</b>	10 (25%)	10 (19.6%)	20 (22%)
<b>1 to 4</b>	7 (18%)	9 (17.6 %)	16 (17.6%)
<b>5 or more</b>	22 (55%)	27 (52.9 %)	49 (53.8%)
<b>Not disclosed</b>	1 (2.5%)	5 (9.8%)	6 (6.6%)
<b>Impact on sales</b>	n=30	n=35	n=65
<b>Dropped more than 75%</b>	9 (30%)	14 (40%)	23 (35.4%)
<b>Dropped between 51 to 75%</b>	11 (37%)	12 (34.3%)	23 (35.4%)
<b>Dropped between 26 to 50%</b>	7 (23%)	6 (17.1%)	13 (20%)
<b>Dropped less than 25%</b>	2 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.1%)
<b>Did not change</b>	1 (3.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)
<b>Not disclosed</b>	0 (0%)	3 (8.6%)	3 (4.6%)
<b>Re-purposed</b>	n=30	n=35	n=65
<b>Yes</b>	13 (43.3%)	17 (48.6%)	30 (46.2%)
<b>No</b>	17 (56.7%)	14 (40%)	31 (47.7%)
<b>Not disclosed</b>	0 (0%)	4 (11.4%)	4(6.2%)

## Impact on restaurant employees

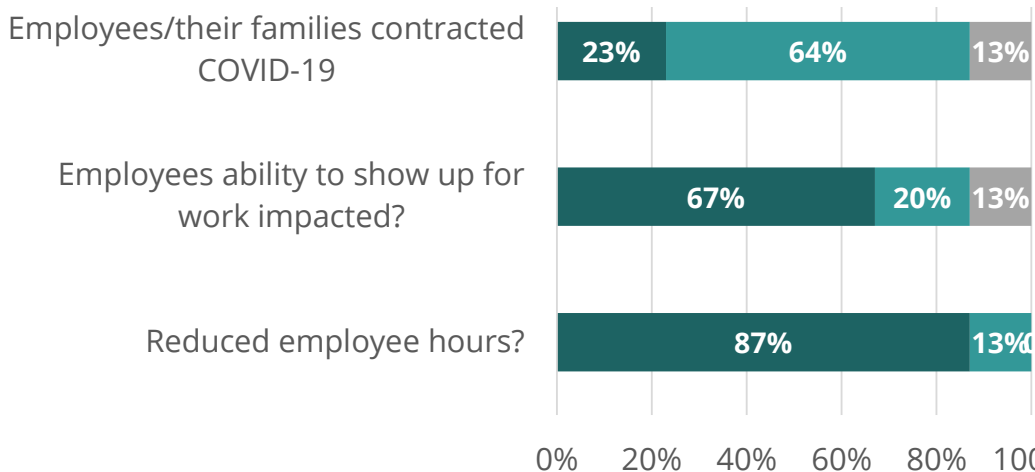
Restaurant workers who stayed employed throughout the survey period faced a number of challenges, as displayed in Figure 1. The majority of the restaurant owners/managers (87%) reported needing to reduce employee hours. In addition, 67% reported their employees' ability to show up for work was impacted by COVID-19 related reasons, such as closure of the schools.

Almost one in four respondents had an employee either develop COVID-19 symptoms or had a family member contract the virus. We asked survey respondents whether their business' ability to offer paid sick-leave benefits changed as a result of COVID-19 operating conditions.

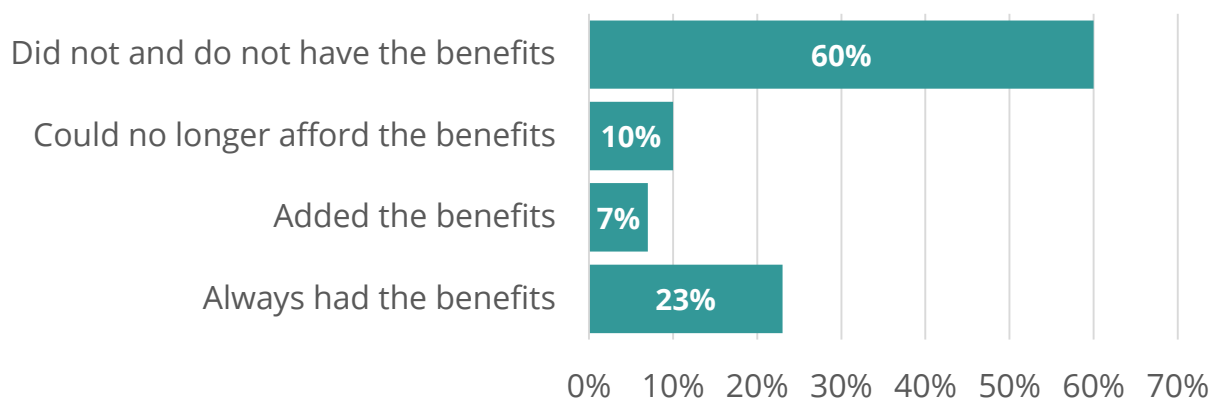
The majority (70%) did not offer paid sick-leave benefits; these businesses either never had them (60%) or could no longer afford them (10%) due to pandemic's impact on revenue. Some restaurants (23%) always had these benefits, and a minority (7%) added these during the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. In addition, respondents reported that some employees quit due to personal reasons, for example, in order to care for a family member.

**Figure 1. Impact on the restaurant employees (employee hours, ability to show up for work, COVID-19 cases, and paid sick-leave benefits)**

Impact of COVID-19 on restaurant employees



Did your ability to offer paid sick-leave benefits change as a result of COVID-19?



## Supply chain disruptions

Supply chain disruptions affected 87% of the restaurant businesses in one form or another. We asked the respondents to elaborate how these supply chain issues affected them. They reported difficulty in finding raw ingredients, such as beef, chicken, cheese, and fish. Beef was particularly hard to come by. The low supply issue also resulted in increased prices of raw ingredients. Furthermore, some respondents mentioned a shortage of imported goods, cleaning supplies, and disposables, such as paper plates. Some notable comments included:

*“Mostly meats. We use only sustainably-produced antibiotic-free meats. Prior to COVID, these were never in short supply. But after many conventional meat producers experienced disruptions in their supply chains, sustainable producers pivoted to retail, creating shortages for restaurants like ours.”*

*“Initially there were lots of supply chain issues and we still experience random issues and INCREASED prices. Produce is surprisingly high when this is usually not the case in the summer. We have had product not delivered because “they did not have any drivers” and we had one supplier shut down for a week due to having an employee with Covid.”*

*“For a while even going to the grocery was an adventure. You couldn’t find anything. From our wholesale suppliers, there are issues. Beef pricing is crazy. Our local fish guy hardly has anything and often send me fish that has been frozen when I asked for fresh. I have had to reach out to not local fish vendors to compensate.”*

## Available loans for and desired support by the restaurant owners

Governments and communities responded to the restaurant industry’s financial challenges through the provision of loans or other financial aid. We asked whether business owner/managers were able to access any loans or other financial aid. The majority of respondents (85%) said ‘Yes’ or ‘In the process’; a minority (5%) were not sure, and some (9%) were not able to access any loans/financial aid. When given the option to specify, restaurateurs mentioned two loan programs: Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL).

Both programs are offered by the U.S. Small Business Administration. The PPP is a direct support to the restaurants to help keep their employees on payroll, whereas EIDL aims to help recover lost revenue due to the crisis (COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan, 2021; Paycheck Protection Program, 2021). A few (n=4) survey respondents noted that the process to apply to PPP was difficult, the money ran out quickly, and the process for forgiveness was daunting. Respondents also indicated that despite such available support, if the economic situation continued in the same way for more than one year (25%), more than six months (53%) or more than a couple months (22%) - they would not be able to keep their business from permanently closing.

In an open-ended question, we asked what type of support restaurateurs would desire in the future. Furthermore, the respondents elaborated on the type of support they would need to keep themselves in business. Table 3 summarizes the type of desired support by businesses desired support and selected quotes. These types of support included rent abatement/reduction, financial support in the form of loans/grants/aid, help with bringing customers back, COVID-19 health measures, better governmental support, less governmental interference, and other types. We asked owners with multiple businesses to answer this question for all of their restaurants. Many of the restaurateurs (n = 24) said they would appreciate monetary support in the form of loans, grants, aid, or rent abatement.

Respondents stated a preference about the government's involvement in the situation. Some (n=10) said they would like less governmental interference, as in stopping the restrictions and regulations when it comes to restaurants operations. On the other hand, some (n=9) asked for increased governmental operations with regards to COVID-19 containment, such as better contact tracing, educating the public about safety rules, and waiting for a vaccine. Yet, some others (n=5) asked for even more involvement by the government, for example by paying half of the meal prices for people purchasing from the restaurants.



Food truck rodeo, Durham. Photo: Mel Norton

**Table 3. Selected quotes from the open-ended question responses about desired support by restaurateurs (n = 55)**

Type of support business owners want (number of respondents)	Selected quotes
Rent reduction/ abatement (n = 8)	<p><i>"Lowered rent until business is up to pre-COVID levels."</i></p> <p><i>"Rent not being added to future months."</i></p>
Financial support, loans / grants / aid (n = 16)	<p><i>"Small business loans with little to no interest rates"</i></p> <p><i>"The ability to renew our PPP loan with full forgiveness for at least 6-12 months or until folks feel comfortable to go out again."</i></p>
Help with bringing the customers back (n =13)	<p><i>"More stimulus checks so customers have \$ to spend."</i></p> <p><i>"Free advertising when we re-open."</i></p>
COVID-19 health measures (n = 9)	<p><i>"Increase in contact tracing. Some employees have been told of exposure by a friend, friend did speak with contact tracer and gave employee's contact info out, but contact tracer never called employee."</i></p> <p><i>"A swift, coordinated federal action to drastically control the contagion. Emergency support to see this through, get it under control, and recover once we have herd immunity or a vaccine. Otherwise it's a second wave and a slow and painful death for many of us."</i></p>
Better governmental support (n = 5)	<p><i>"If government pays half of purchase for customers may be help."</i></p> <p><i>"To have a city or statewide coalition of educating consumers that we can get out and dine safely with masks and social distancing. Also the city needs to get their public transport back to normal schedule because our employees cannot work evenings with bus service ending at 9pm"</i></p>
Less governmental interference (n = 10)	<p><i>"Stay open 100% and don't shut us down again."</i></p> <p><i>"Get government out of business."</i></p>
Other types of support (n = 8)	<p><i>"Financial aid to improve the air quality inside, and city changes to outdoor dining spaces. We need more space, and more available ways to sell alcohol."</i></p> <p><i>"Regulating prices of supplies &amp; food costs."</i></p>

# Discussion

This study documented the impact on Durham, North Carolina's restaurant industry following governmental policies ordering the restaurants to close for indoor dining (May 2020). In this section, we discuss survey results as well as the limitations and future recommendations.

## Impact on operations and sales

It is important to note that even pre-pandemic, restaurants have a difficult time staying in business. The possibility of restaurant closure can range between 15% and 27% during the first year of opening and 50% to 60% by the end of 5 years of being in business (Healy & Iomaire, 2019). The pandemic exacerbated the likelihood of restaurant closing due to the governmental restrictions about dining-in combined with the reluctance of consumers to eat out (Gursoy et al., 2020). The National Restaurant Association of the US reported in April 2020 that four out of ten businesses closed and two out of three employees lost their jobs during the pandemic (National Restaurant Association (NRA), 2020). The results of our study are in accordance with the NRA findings, where we found that almost a third (28.6%) of Durham restaurants closed their businesses either temporarily or permanently. The remaining restaurants that remained open (71.4%), either provided only take-out and/or delivery or indoor dining with social distancing. Regardless of whether the business offered take-out/delivery or indoor dining with social distancing, we found that there was a loss in revenue surpassing 70%.

## Impact on restaurant employees

A decline in revenue placed restaurants in a difficult position. If restaurants continue to provide only take-out and delivery, they risk loss in revenue; if they open fully, they create environments for community spread. Our findings revealed that more than 80% of Durham restaurant owners/managers had to reduce employee hours. Furthermore, one in four restaurant employees either contracted COVID-19

or had a family member who contracted the virus. When an employee contracted COVID-19 or was in contact with someone who did, they needed to stay home as advised by contact tracers. This created additional challenges of loss of employee hours for the owners. At the same time, we found that the majority of Durham restaurant businesses did not offer sick-leave benefits, which in turn puts the restaurant employees in a difficult position. Pre-pandemic, restaurant jobs were among the lowest paid according to the US labor projections between 2016-2026. Restaurant jobs (falling in the category of food preparation and serving related occupations) were among the lowest paid, despite being one of the fastest growing sectors for employment pre-pandemic (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Additional challenges during the pandemic, included struggles with collecting unemployment benefits from the government due to immigration status or their accurate income being previously undocumented (One Fair Wage & Food Labor Research Center, 2021).

## Supply chain disruptions

The interconnectedness and fragility of the food system was evident in various global food supply chain disruptions (Aday & Aday, 2020). In this study, Durham restaurants reported experiencing low supply of many foodstuffs, such as beef, chicken, cheese, and fish, as well as an increase in prices. Impact on the food supply chains were also documented in other studies. For example, low demand from the hospitality industry (during mandated shut downs and during restaurant operational pivots to take out/curbside pick-up focus) put farms in a bind in which they did not know what to do with their farm outputs (Stephens et al., 2020). The pervasive supply chain interruptions raises questions about the resiliency of the globally interconnected food system in times of crisis. Some argue that that local food supply chains were able to more quickly shift and adapt to the disruptions due to its size and nimbleness, but the permanence of leaning towards local food supply chains is yet to be seen (Thilmany et al., 2021).

## Type of support desired by restaurant owners

In terms of support, restaurant owners stated their desire for monetary support, such as rent reduction or abatement and loans with favorable conditions as well as help with bringing customers back indoors. Governments play an important role in preventing the demise of the hospitality industry. The respondents of our survey provided mixed responses regarding government interventions (see Table 3). While some stated that they wanted more governmental control, others preferred less interference. For our survey respondents, more governmental control was defined by first taking the virus under control before opening everything up, better contact tracing, and need for vaccinations. Less interference, on the other hand, was a desire for government to 'stay out of business' and let the restaurants stay open at 100% capacity. It is important to understand the impact and trade-off between different well-meaning policies or lack thereof. For example, the UK implemented a subsidy program they called 'Eat-Out-to-Help-Out' to encourage people to patronize restaurants. The subsequent research found a causal impact of this subsidy program and an increase in COVID-19 cases stemming from the restaurant hot-spots (Fetzer, 2020). Governments should both take consideration of the desires of the restaurant owners as well as the cautions of the public health authorities when creating aid programs in a pandemic situation.

## Limitations

This was a cross-sectional study and by its nature only able to capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Durham restaurant industry at a point in time. Further studies are needed to show the level of revenue, employment, business loss; as well as the resilience of the industry at the late stages of the pandemic and beyond. We implemented various methods to reach and invite the restaurant owners and managers to join the study, however, we may not have been able to reach those who closed their doors prior to outreach. This might partially explain the overall low response rate of the survey.

Furthermore, the restaurants who participated in our survey were mainly locally-owned businesses. These restaurants are likely less resourced in comparison with franchise/chain restaurants. Thus, the findings of this study are not generalizable to the chains or franchise restaurants.

## Conclusion

This study documented the consequences of the COVID-19 on the Durham, North Carolina restaurant industry by late summer, 2020. This was a time when the restrictions of indoor dining were being lifted gradually. Durham is a town known for its restaurant scene and in our survey the majority of the restaurants who responded were locally-owned. This local restaurant industry experienced a drastic loss of sales, reduced employee hours or lay-offs, and food supply issues, which is echoed in many other parts of the world. This study adds to the collective of voices across the world from the hospitality industry.

As a foodie town, Durham is known for its local restaurants and chefs. This study primarily captured the challenges of this restaurant segment. Durham restaurant owners reported concerns about the challenges of remaining open during the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared a need and desire for financial and operational support. Restaurant owners also asked for assistance in signalling to customers that reduced COVID-19 restrictions would allow restaurant service, and re-opening of public transportation.

There is insight from these comments for local, state and national governmental decision makers. Future pandemic-related actions need to preserve and uplift the social fabric of towns like Durham, NC through its signature restaurant culture.

Additional research is needed to capture Durham's restaurant adaptations to COVID-19 pandemic and public safety restrictions at different times.



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