

# FOOD POLICY COUNCILS 2021 CENSUS

## Background

In 2021, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) conducted a census of food policy councils (FPCs) in the United States. There were three main objectives of the 2021 census (also referred to as the 2021 survey throughout this report):

1. Collect basic information about FPCs
2. Learn about the activities of FPCs during their sustained response to the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the impact of COVID-19 on FPCs' focus and work
3. Track the responses of FPCs to COVID-19 overtime

This report is laid out as follows. First, we summarize the methods used to collect responses to the 2021 survey and analyze the responses received. Next, we walk through the results of the survey, visualizing how respondents answered questions about the makeup of their organization, how it responded to COVID-19, and how it engages in policy and advocacy.

## Methods

CLF collected the data in this analysis from the 2021 FPC census sent out to 352 food policy councils across the United States from May to August 2021. Two versions of the census were sent out depending on whether councils responded to the 2020 FPC census. The specific differences between the two versions are not relevant for this report. There were, however, several questions about the characteristics of the council that rarely change from year to year that were not included in one version of the 2021 survey. In order to present a full summary of FPC characteristics, we include data from the 2020 census for the following results: geographic focus area, organizational structure, age, relationship to government, membership representation, and policy priorities.

In total, we received 226 responses from active councils, or councils in transition or development. We excluded duplicate responses, groups that do not fit our definition of an FPC, and inactive councils from the analysis. We define an FPC as an organized group of stakeholders from various sectors that may be sanctioned by a government body or may exist independently

of government, which uses policy to address food systems issues and needs at the local (city/municipality or county), state/provincial, regional or tribal nations levels.

We define policy as a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual (source: Oxford Dictionary). This includes laws and ordinances; the administration, funding, or implementation of policy at local, state, tribal, or federal levels of government; and changes in policies and standards set by institutions like schools, hospitals, and private companies. Policy work includes working directly to change these various policies, as well as educating or coordinating the actions of others to advocate for such policies.

At least five active FPCs are working in sovereign tribal nations in North America, but only three completed the survey. We included these three responses throughout the analysis.

For the charts related to the following categories, the responses were not mutually exclusive (FPCs could select more than one answer):

- Relationship to government
- Membership representation
- Actions taken in response to COVID-19
- Policy development/advocacy in response to COVID-19
- Advocacy actions taken in response to COVID-19
- Policy priorities (FPCs were instructed to select three among the answer choices)

## Results

### Geographic Focus

As shown in Figure 1, just over one-third (38%) of the councils operated at the county level only, 19% at the regional level (either multi-county or multi-state), and 19% at both municipal and county levels. A smaller percentage work at the municipal level only (14%) and at the state level (9%). Only 1% of councils that responded to the survey operate within tribal nations.

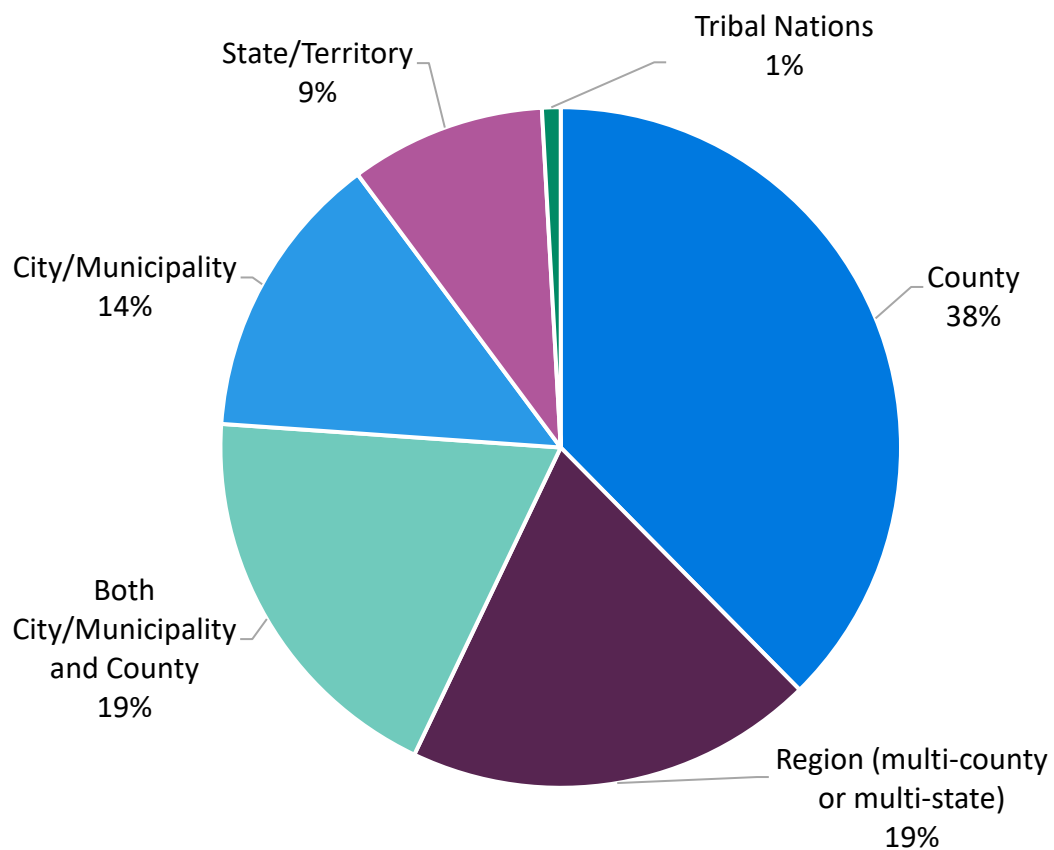


Figure 1: Geographic focus of FPCs. N=226.

## Organizational Structure

Figure 2 below shows that a third of councils (32%) were housed in a nonprofit, 36% were embedded in government, 18% were structured as a grassroots coalition, and 18% were incorporated as nonprofits. A smaller percentage were embedded in a university (4%) or used a different organizational structure (2%).

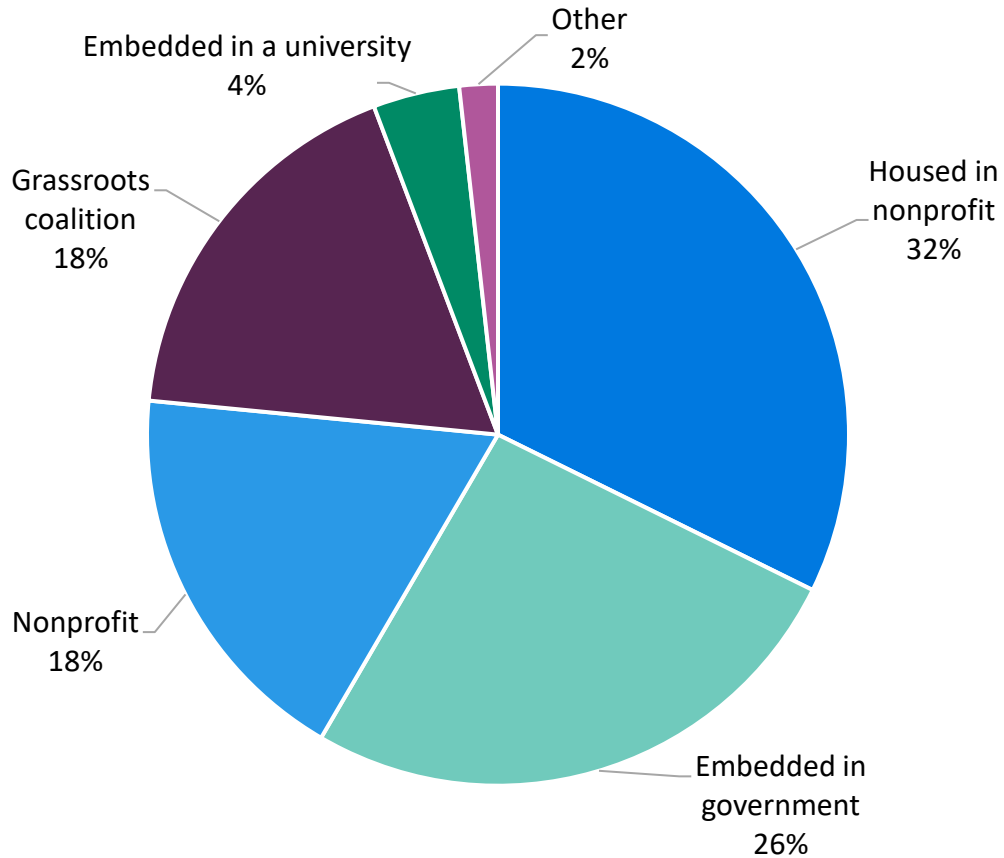


Figure 2: Organizational structure. N=226.

## Age

Councils were asked what year the FPC formed. Based on the year formed, researchers calculated the age of FPCs. As seen in Figure 3, 35% of councils have been around for 6-10 years, 27% for 3-5 years, 20% for more than ten years, and 15% for two years or less.

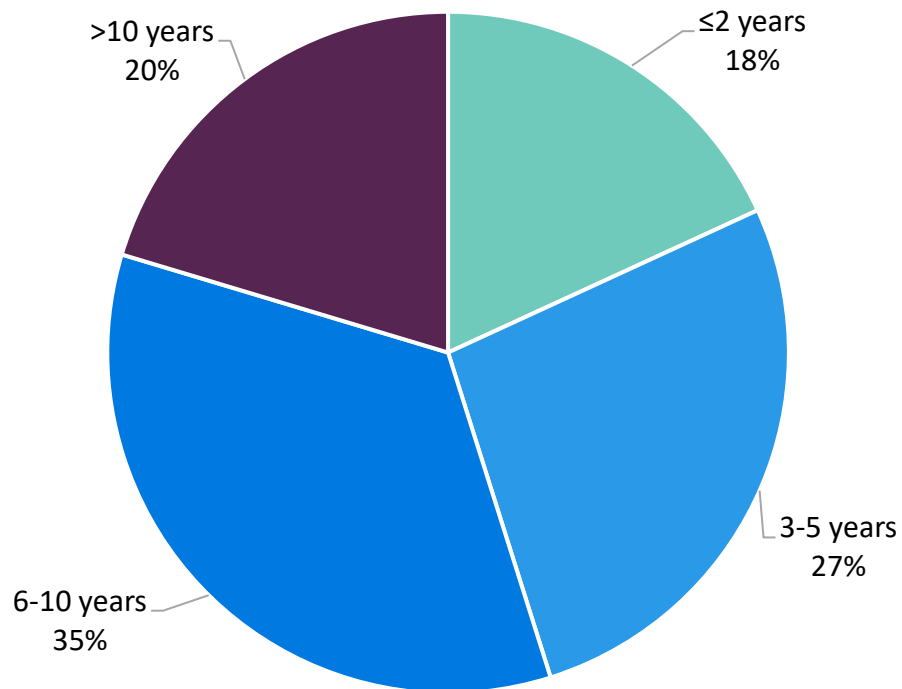


Figure 3: Age of FPCs. N=226.

## Relationship to government

Almost all councils (87%) reported having some connection to government. As shown in Figure 4, the most common relationship between councils and the government is that government officials are members of the council (70% of councils have government employees as members and 15% have elected officials). According to the survey, 43% of councils reported that the government provides in-kind support for their FPC and 41% said that the government seeks advice from the council. Other ways in which councils interact with the government include an organizational structure wherein the council is embedded in a government (26%), council members are appointed by the government (20%), and the council was created by legislation (18%).

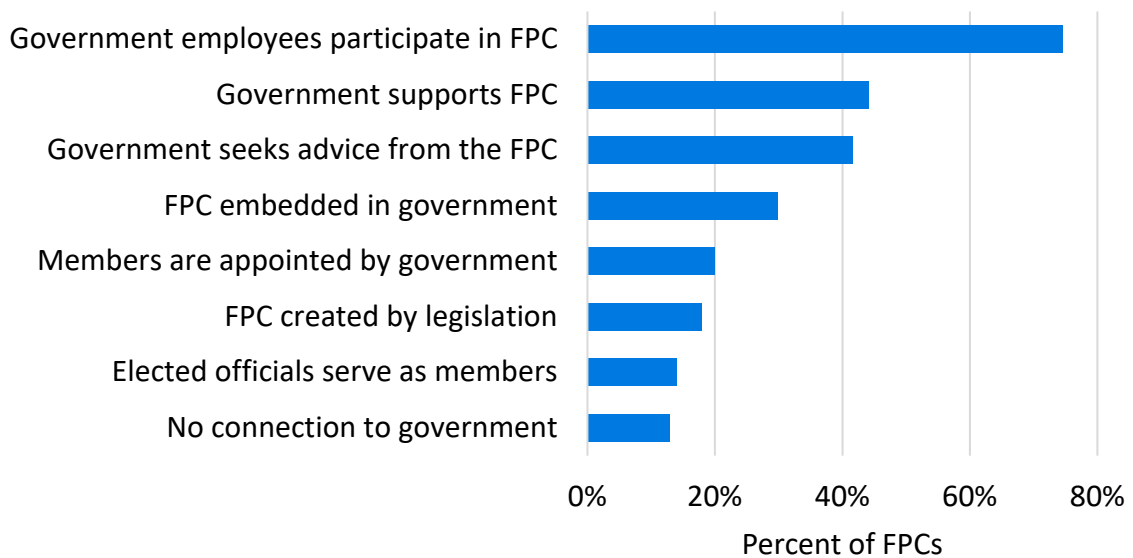


Figure 4: Relationship to Government. N=197.

## Membership representation

Individuals from many areas connected to the food system participate in food policy councils. Over 70% of councils had at least one member representing each of the following sectors (Figure 5)—community (94%), anti-hunger or emergency food service (89%), food production (82%), public health (79%), government agency (73%), and cooperative extension (73%). Councils also reported high representation from higher education (69%), health care (66%), economic development (51%), elementary and secondary education (51%), faith-based organizations (50%), and social justice (50%).

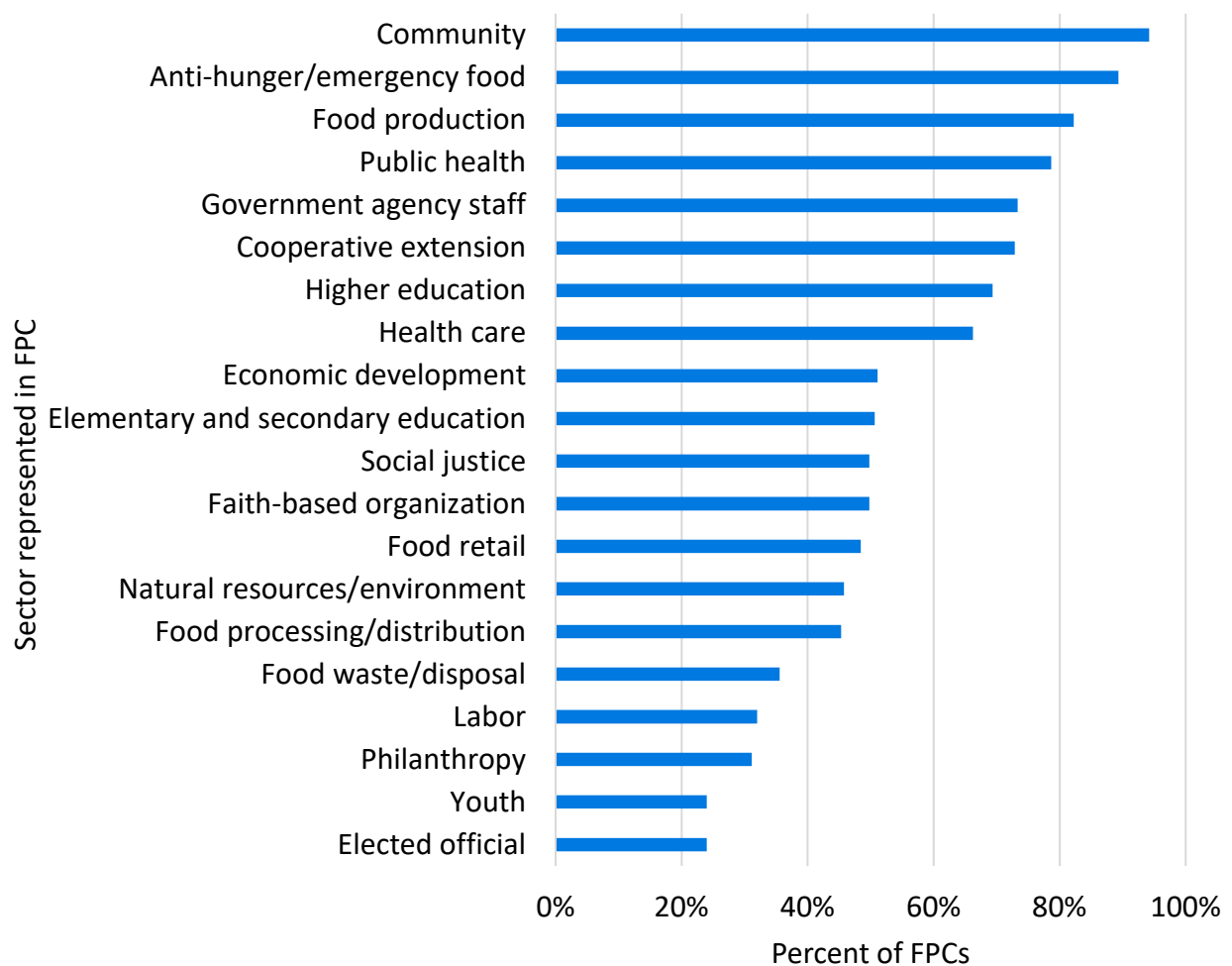


Figure 5: Membership Representation. Percent of FPCs with members that represent each sector. N=225.

## Annual budget

As seen in Figure 6, about a third of councils had no budget, another third had a budget under \$10,000, and the remaining third had a budget over \$10,000. The sample size for this

question is smaller than the other questions in this section since not all respondents to the 2021 survey received this question, and we did not think it was fitting to include data on councils' 2020 budgets with their 2021 budgets.

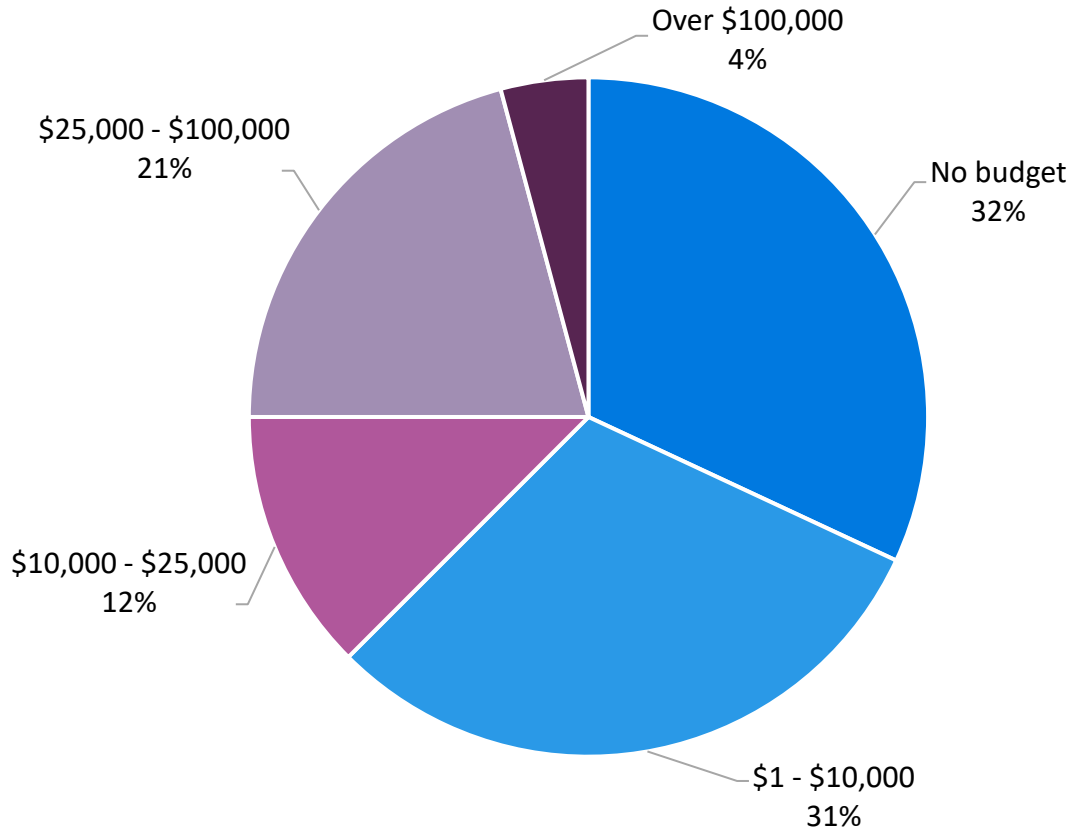
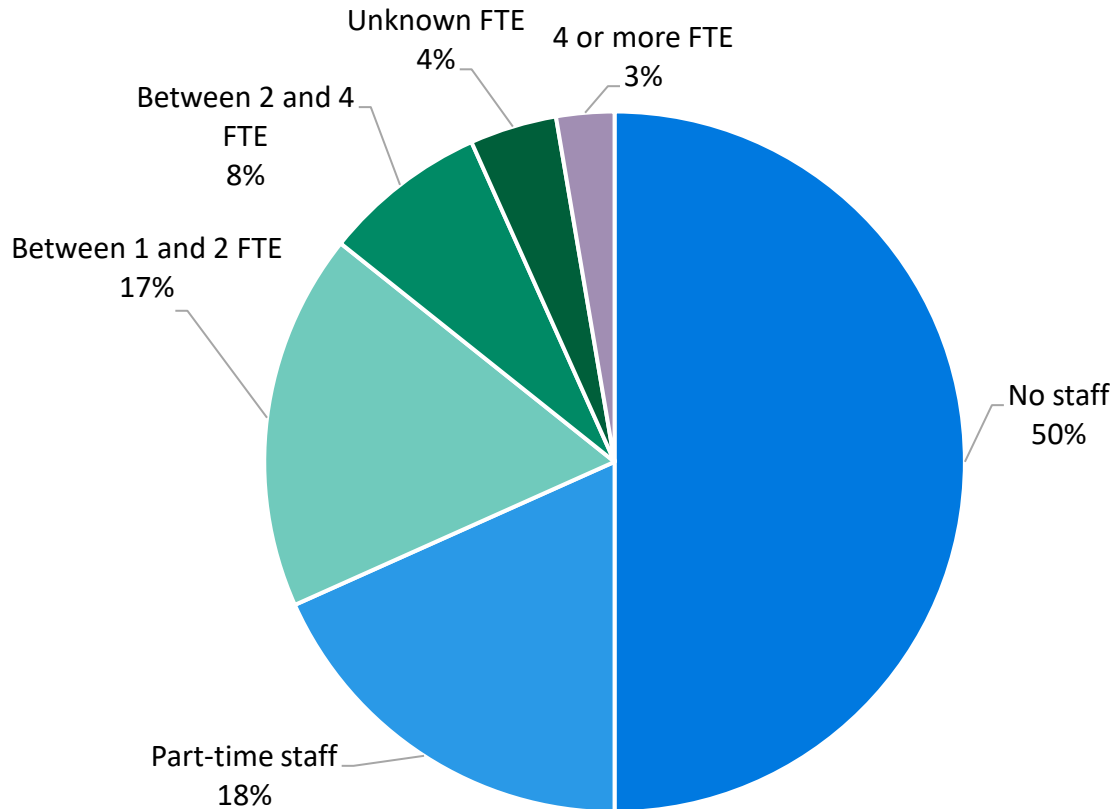


Figure 6: Approximate Annual Budget in 2021. N=72.



## Paid staff

Half of all respondents reported that their council has paid staff. As shown in Figure 7, eighteen percent of councils reported having part-time staff, 17% of councils reported having between one and two full time equivalent (FTE) staff, 8% of councils reported having between two and four FTE staff, and only 3% of councils reported having more than 4 FTE staff.



*Figure 7: Percent of FPCs with paid staff by full-time equivalents. "Unknown" represents FPCs with paid staff that did not specify the FTE equivalent of their paid staff. N=224.*

## Equity framework

Forty-one percent of councils reported using a racial or social equity framework when making decisions about their policy priorities or advocacy actions as seen in Figure 8. Another 41% of councils said they were developing a framework to influence their policy and/or advocacy work. The remaining 18% of councils indicated that they neither use an equity framework nor are in the process of developing one.

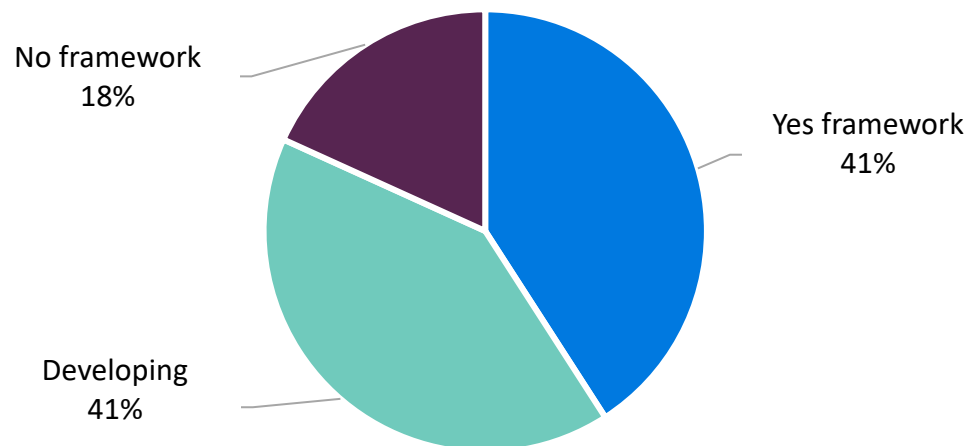


Figure 8: Percent of FPCs that use a racial or social equity framework or criteria when making decisions. N=224.

A larger portion of councils with paid staff currently use an equity framework in their decision-making (47%) compared to those without paid staff (36%), as reported in Figure 9.

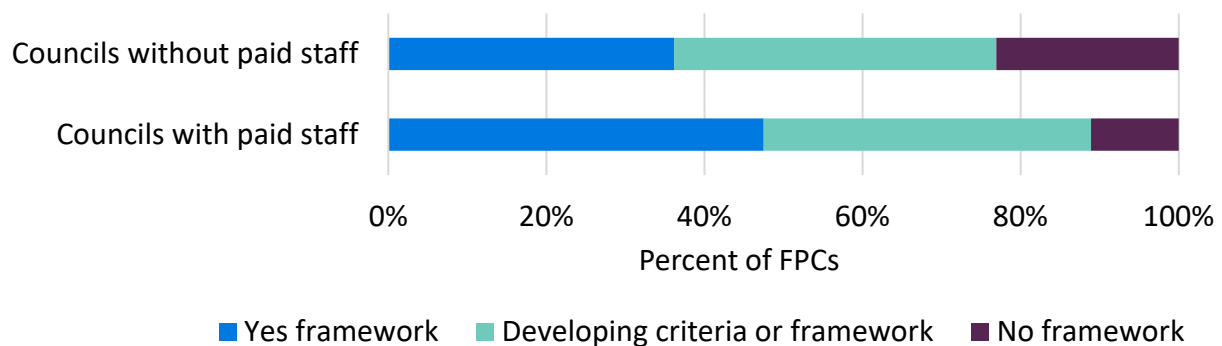


Figure 9: Percent of FPCs that use a racial or social equity framework or criteria when making decisions by whether the FPC has paid staff or not. N=225.

## Actions in response to COVID-19

Ninety-seven percent of councils led or supported at least one action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 10 shows that the most common actions taken by councils included facilitating connections across food systems sectors to match resources with needs (81%), holding meetings between food sector representatives (77%), using social media to share real-time information about food system resources (77%), and educating the public about food systems challenges (77%). In these top four areas, a higher share of councils led, as opposed to supported, the actions. The only other action for which this was the case was holding meetings between food system representatives. Over half of the responding councils participated in all the actions listed in the survey, with the exception of creating a dashboard.

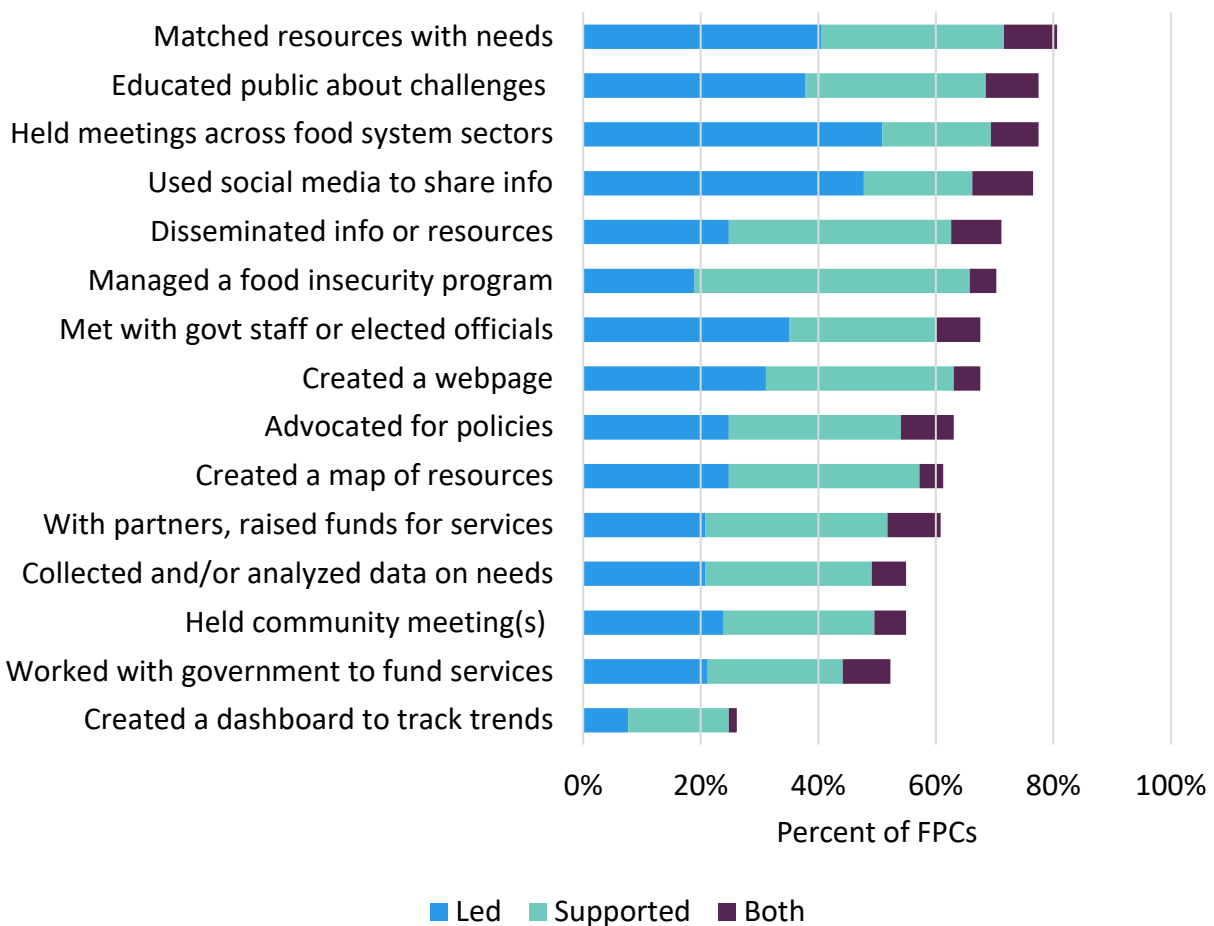


Figure 10: Percent of FPCs that led and/or supported an action in response to COVID-19. N=222.

Figure 11 illustrates that councils with a higher number of paid full time equivalent (FTE) staff engaged in more actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, 34% of councils with part-time staff supported a large number of advocacy actions (11-15) compared with 68% of councils with between one and two FTE staff.

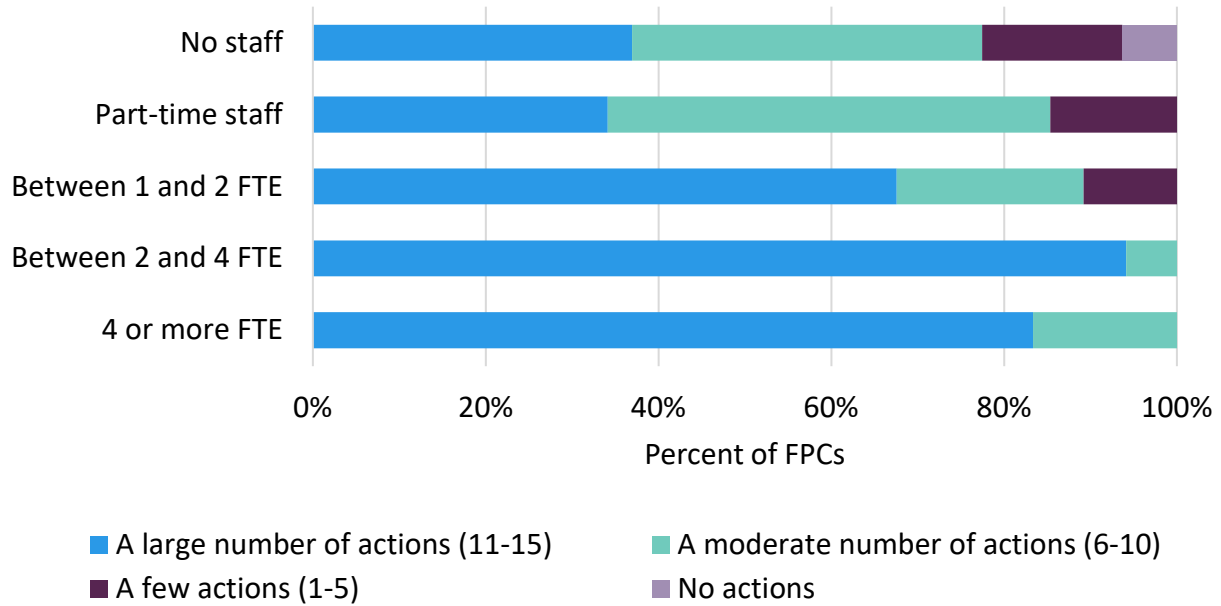


Figure 11: Percent of FPCs that led and/or supported actions in response to COVID-19 by number of actions led and/or supported and number of paid full-time equivalent staff. N=111 no staff, N=40 part-time staff, N=37 1-2 FTE, N=17 2-4 FTE, N=6 4 or more.

As shown in Figure 12, the percentage of councils that undertook many actions in response to COVID-19 is similar across all organizational structures (ranging from 50% to 58%), except grassroots councils, which completed a smaller share than the other types (28%).

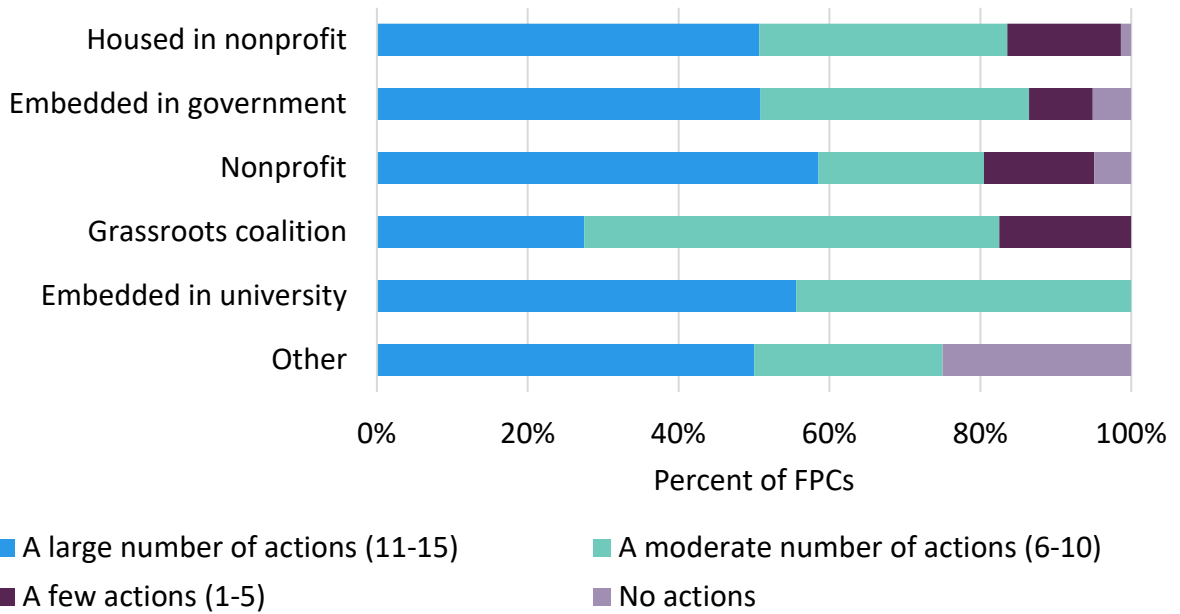
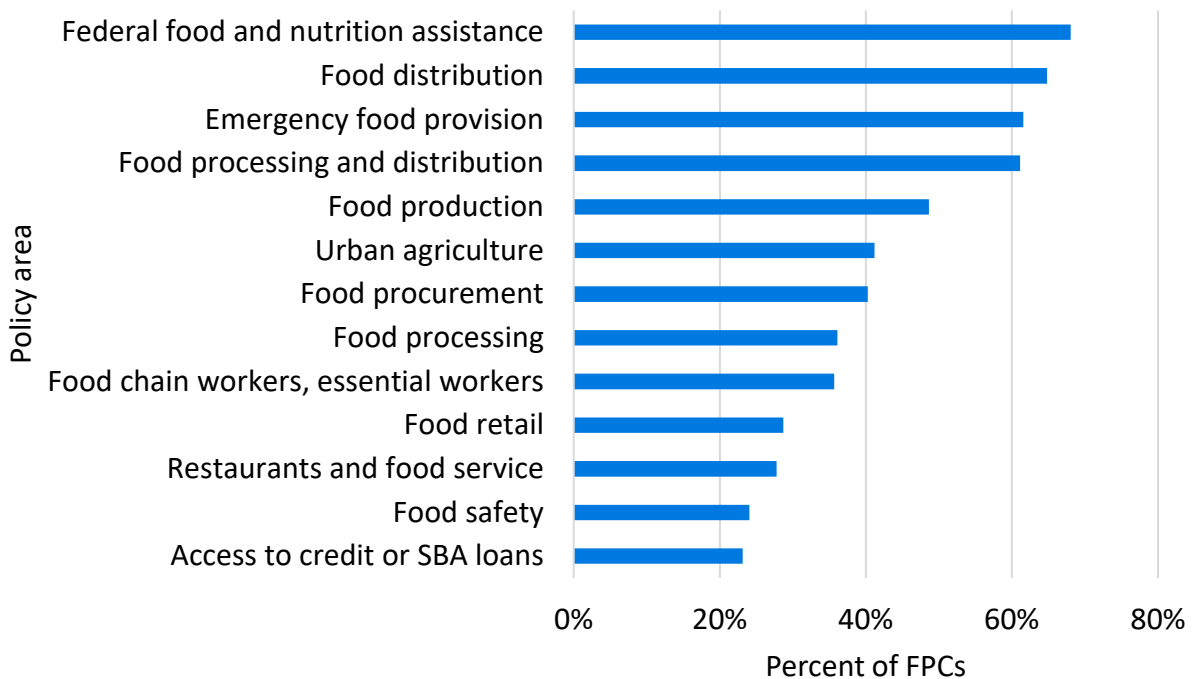


Figure 12: Percent of FPCs that led and/or supported actions in response to COVID-19 by number of actions led and/or supported and organizational structure. N=71 Housed in nonprofit, N=58 Embedded in government, N=41 Nonprofit, N=40 Grassroots coalition, N=8 Embedded in university, N=4 Other.

## Policy development

We asked councils in which areas of food policy and at which level of government they worked to develop or advocate for policies in response to COVID-19, either directly or by supporting efforts led by another organization. Eighty-two percent of councils reported that they had engaged in policy development or advocacy in response to COVID-19. As seen in Figure 13, the highest share of councils reporting that they worked in policy development or advocacy was in the areas of federal food and nutrition assistance (68%), food distribution (65%), emergency food provision (62%), and food processing and distribution (61%). Councils worked most at the local level, followed by the state level, across all areas of food policy in 2021.



*Figure 13: Percent of FPCs that helped to develop or advocated for policies in response to COVID, either directly or by supporting efforts led by another organization. N=216.*

## Advocacy actions

Eighty-three percent of respondents engaged in at least one advocacy action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 14 shows that the most common advocacy actions included meeting with policymakers (51%), providing policy recommendations to policymakers (50%), supporting a partner organization's advocacy efforts by signing letters and providing testimony (49%), educating the public about policy issues or candidates (45%), supporting or directing an advocacy campaign for a specific policy (36%), and calling policymakers (31%).

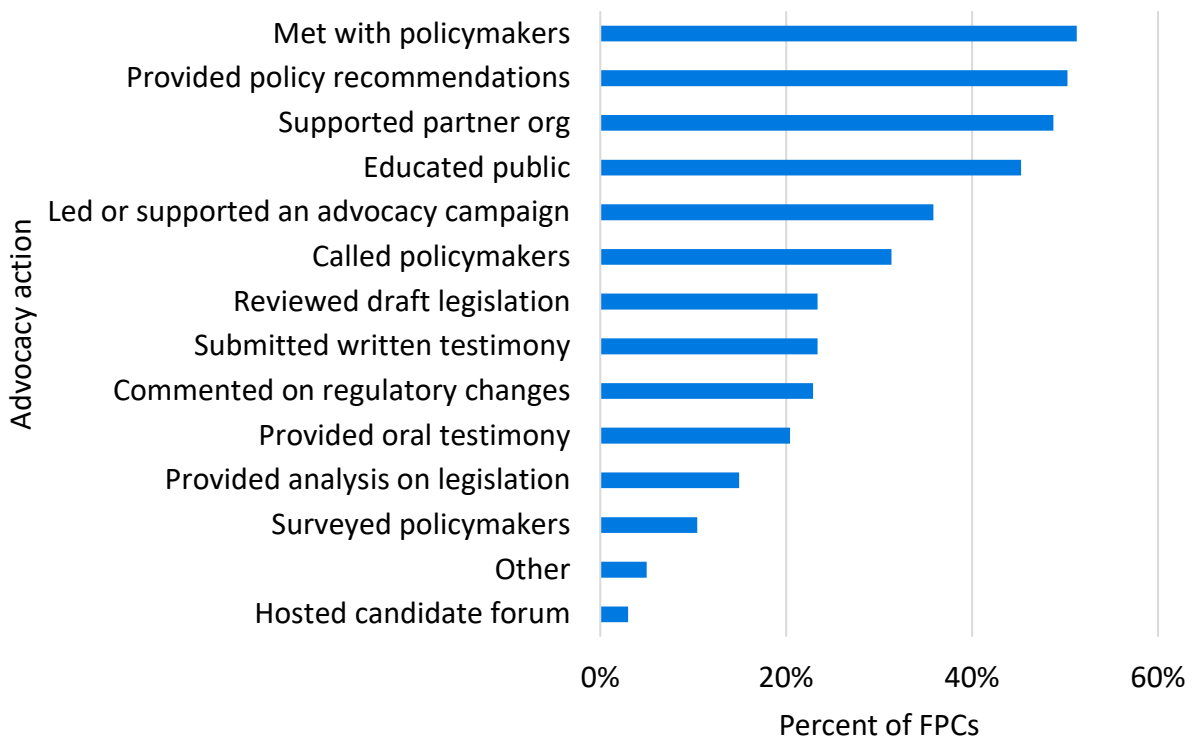


Figure 14: Percent of FPCs by advocacy action taken in response to COVID-19. N=201.

The share of councils that reported completing several advocacy actions (seven or more) increased alongside full-time equivalent staff, as illustrated in Figure 15. For instance, 16% of councils with no paid staff reported completing several advocacy actions compared to 19% of councils with part-time staff and 31% of councils with between one and two FTE staff. A greater share of nonprofit FPCs engaged in many advocacy activities compared to other FPC organization types. In contrast, we found that grassroots FPCs engaged in fewer advocacy activities compared to other organization types.

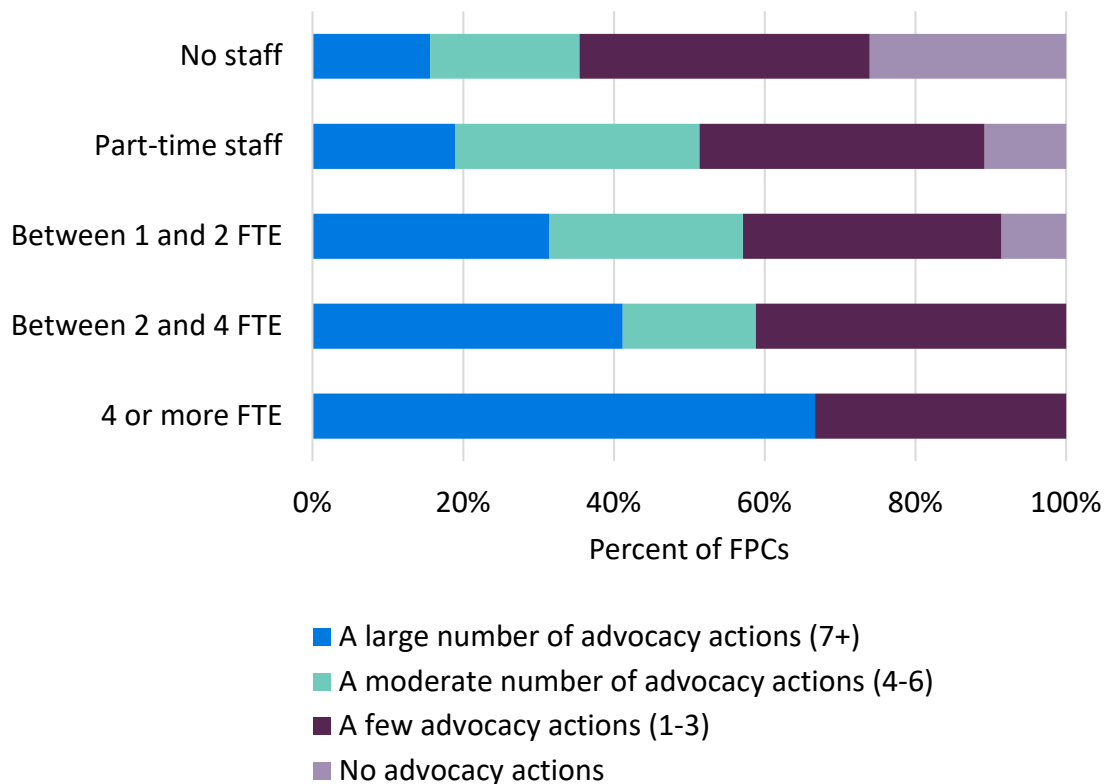


Figure 15: Percent of FPCs that took advocacy actions in response to COVID-19 by number of advocacy actions and number of paid full-time equivalent staff. N=96 no staff, N=37 part-time staff, N=35 1-2FTE, N=17 2-4 FTE, N=6 more than 4 FTE.



## Policy priorities

Figure 16 shows how FPCs ranked their policy priorities in 2021. Healthy food access and anti-hunger/anti-poverty were the only policy priorities chosen by over half of FPCs—63% and 56% respectively. About a third of councils choose food production (34%) and economic development (29%) as top policy priorities. The least common policy priorities included natural resources and environment (2%), and food labor (7%).

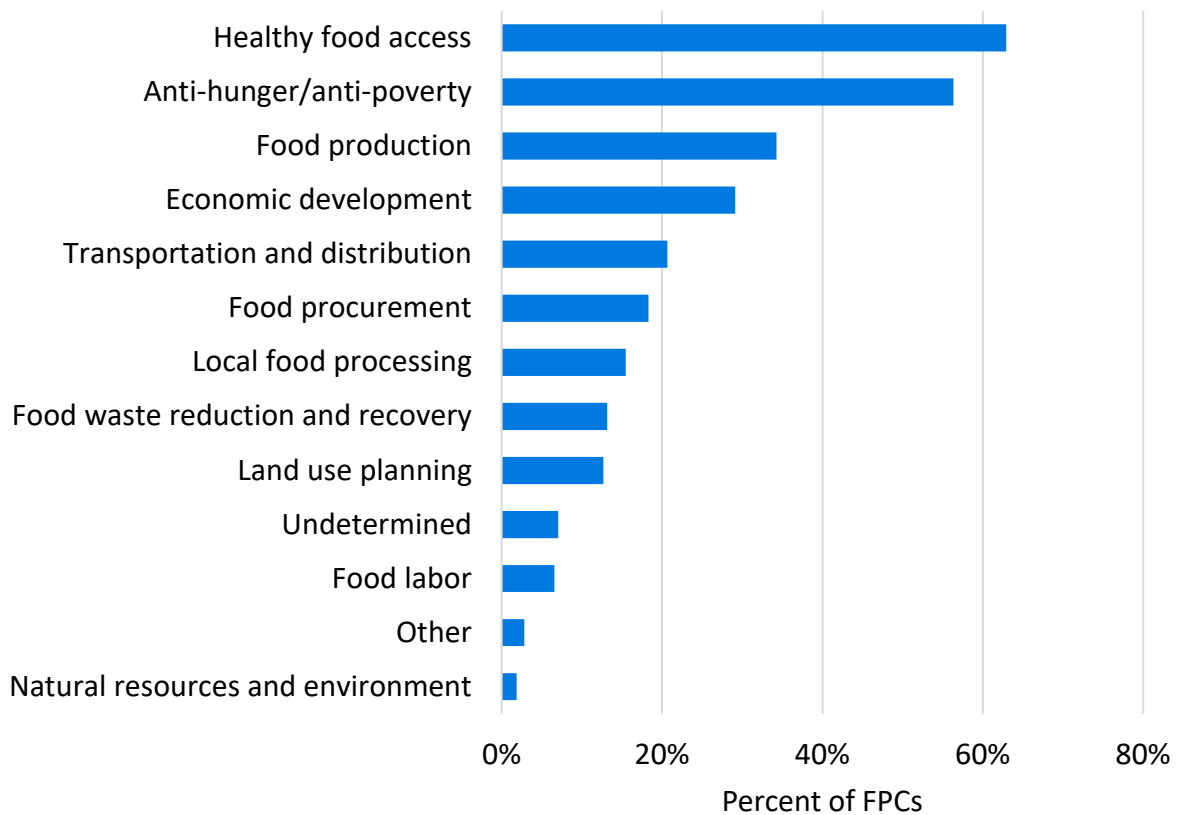


Figure 16: Percent of FPCs indicating each policy priority. N=213.