

FOOD FACILITY INSPECTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The restaurant industry has experienced some of the highest scale of detriment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the food retail facilities and restaurant businesses were presented with COVID-19 centered guidelines in order to continue operations. Here we use data from the Retail Food Protection Program to track the rates of passes, conditional passes, and closures issued by health inspectors and compare those numbers to before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our studies show the new COVID-19 guidelines and regulations that have been implemented by the health department resulted in a decrease of conditional passes and closures.

Keywords: food safety, health inspector, COVID-19 guidelines, retail food protection program

INTRODUCTION

Food safety is an important public health priority. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that “each year roughly 1 in 6 Americans (or 48 million people) gets sick from contaminated food or beverages and 3,000 die from foodborne diseases” [1]. The state and local agencies enforce the Retail Food Protection Program to promote the food safety principles and to minimize the incidence of foodborne illness. More than 3,000 state, local, and tribal agencies have a primary responsibility to regulate the retail food and foodservice industries in the United States. These agencies are responsible for the oversight of over 1 million food establishments including restaurants, groceries, vending machines, and institutional foodservices [2].

In March of 2020, when the COVID-19 outbreak was declared and people were urged to stay at home to limit the spread of the coronavirus, the restaurant industry was among those that were most negatively impacted by the stay-at-home order. According to the Restaurant Industry report, more than 110,000 eating and drinking places were closed for business temporarily due to the pandemic in the U.S. [3]. However, even at the peak of initial closures and during the state-wide shutdown, the grocery and restaurant business, categorized as essential businesses, tried to retool and adapt to the new realities and remained opened to serve the community. Referring to the CDC and the state public health department’s guidelines, the local agencies provided food facilities with COVID-19 guidelines, which included guides to using and implementing facial coverings, social distancing, cleaning and sanitizing requirements, food handlers’ personal hygiene, etc. During the pandemic periods, it must be essential and ideal that health inspectors promote the COVID-19 guidelines, educate food facility employees, and continue to enforce the retail food facility inspection regulation.

The objectives of this case study are to examine the number of food facility inspections completed by a local agency before and during the COVID-19 pandemic year and to compare the food facilities' inspection results during the same periods.

BACKGROUND

For this case study, the Retail Food Protection Program run by one of the largest counties in Northern California was examined. In general, the county-level Food Protection Program is responsible for the enforcement of state and local health codes at all retail food facilities. Approximately 5,000 food facilities that have a permit to operate are registered in this county's program. The Registered Environmental Specialist (a.k.a Health Inspector) inspects each permitted facility an average two times a year. Some facilities are inspected more than two times a year when reinspection is needed due to the previous inspection results or a customer's complaint.

A pass is issued when no more than one major violation is observed and is corrected during the inspection. The food facility with conditional pass are re-inspected within 24-72 hours in order to acquire a pass. All major violations noted on the inspection report must be corrected or mitigated immediately. If the major violations identified in their initial inspection remain corrected during the re-inspection, a pass is issued at the re-inspection. Some facilities are forced to close their facilities at their initial inspection when an imminent threat to health and safety is observed. Examples of the closure order include surfacing sewage, lack of hot water, pest infestation, or severe unsanitary conditions. The closed facilities should fix the problems and request to be inspected when all the issues are resolved. The food facility inspection report is available and accessible by the public, and the most recent inspection reports for each facility are posted online.

The secondary data for the Food Inspection Statistics Report for 2018, 2019, and 2020 were obtained from the county's Environmental Management Department. The data included the number of the inspections per year and by different categories, the inspection results (pass/conditional pass/closure), and the number of major and minor violations per inspection. The descriptive analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel® to compare the numbers, frequencies, and percent of the results before and during pandemic.

FOOD FACILITY INSPECTION RESULTS

Table 1 shows the total number of inspections implemented by the county health inspectors and the number of its pass, conditional pass, and closure issues. Out of the approximately 5,000 food facilities in this county, the total number of inspections including re-inspection were 13,919 and 14,823 for 2018 and 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic. An average 93.5% of the inspections completed issued a 'pass', while a weighted average 5.23% and 1.4% of the total inspections issued the 'conditional pass' or 'closure', respectively. In 2020 when the pandemic began, the total number of inspections executed was 8,323 with a 95.4% pass rate followed by a 3.5% conditional pass and a 1.0 % closure.

TABLE 1. Food Facility Inspection Frequencies and Results

Calendar Year ^a	Before Pandemic				During Pandemic	
	2018		2019		2020	
No. of Inspection	13,919		14,823		8,723 ^b	
Pass	12,920	92.8%	13,915	93.9%	8,320	95.4%
Conditional Pass	764	5.5%	736	5.0%	172	3.6%
Closure	235	1.7%	172	1.2%	90	1.0%

^a Calendar Year: January 1 to December 31

^b The State of California ordered to shut down for non-essential works from March 19 through June 15, 2020. The Retail Food Protection Program was suspended during this time.

DISCUSSION

Compared to the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of the inspections completed for 2020 were reduced by 40%. However, its reduced number of inspections stands to reasons that 1) the food facility inspection was suspended during the three-month long state shut down (mid-March to mid-June), accounting for one quarter of the calendar year; 2) the numbers of the restaurants were temporarily and voluntarily closed (or some were permanently) because the restaurants were unable to adapt to the tentative COVID-19 guidelines and were unequipped to handle the increased need of take-out orders, and/or lacked the necessary amount of employees to continue to operate.

Moreover, it is noticeable that the pass rates for the food facility inspection during 2020 was similar with some increases, while conditional pass and closure rates from the inspection decreased, compared to the pre-pandemic years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, food facilities including restaurants and groceries were expected to follow the state and local COVID-19 guidelines which required additional efforts in regard to food preparation, sanitization of all surfaces including non-food contact surfaces, and personal hygiene of all food handlers. In addition, foods prepared for take-out orders are expected to be cooked thoroughly and maintain safe holding temperatures until picked up to reduce risk factors causing food poisoning.

This case study reveals that the Retail Food Protection Program has been working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the lifting of the state-wide shut down, the health inspectors continued to inspect food facilities and enforce the state and local health codes at retail food facilities. The COVID-19 guidelines for the retail food facilities were not required but are recommended for retail food facilities to implement. The health inspectors led to promote the COVID-19 guidelines and educate the food employees. The retail food facilities put additional efforts to serve the community by following the CDC and local guidelines during this period as well as the required food safety regulations. All of these endeavors by the health inspectors and the retail food facilities are key components to ensure food safety principles are fulfilled to minimize risks of foodborne illnesses during unprecedented pandemic circumstances.

REFERENCES

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