Gerrlyn Gacao
UP206A
10/11/20

"Food Aid's Secret Weapon: Data"
https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/food-aid-secret-weapon-data

The article I chose highlights the work that The Do Good Auto Coalition, an umbrella organization based out of Newark, New Jersey, has been doing to address food insecurity across the city. This organization was originally created to simply connect non-profits that needed transportation with auto dealerships who were willing to loan cars. However, since the COVID crisis hit the US in March, they have transformed their purpose to not only loan vehicles to organizations distributing food to communities in need, but also use data science tools to map and optimize food distribution across Newark. Through this, they provide a backbone to these efforts by streamlining communication between food distributors and optimizing routes. Due to their success, they have now partnered with the City of Newark to launch a pilot program to expand their work to develop more equitable food distribution across food insecure communities.

What I really enjoyed about this article is that the data was being used in a way to serve a need, as well as to build stronger bridges across the organizations and people involved in food distribution in a new way. In addition, it amplified their work and expanded their capacities to fulfill the obvious need to get the right amount of food to the right communities at a faster pace. Given the fact that Uber and Lyft have already created this type of technology that optimizes routes for their drivers, these capabilities are not very new, but I feel that the way it was deployed was done innovatively to benefit both public and private entities. As someone with an organizing background, I know how frustrating it can be to inadvertently duplicate efforts across groups. I also see that many organizers have had to revamp their tactics to fit the times. I feel that data, especially when used in this way, can help us do so more effectively while reducing any overlap. Another aspect that caught my attention was their decision not only to optimize drop-off routes in itself, but to do so by layering in housing and unemployment data to understand whether the food is actually going to areas with the greatest need. I appreciated this intersectional approach to evaluating food distributors' programs in that sense, and it made me reflect on how I might be able to do so in my research as well.