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At Public School 398 in East Flatbush, elementary school children on March 20 were offered a lunch of beef patties, zucchini and pears.

A city health inspector found conditions were not appetizing: in the cafeteria and kitchen, the inspector spotted live roaches and close to 600 fresh mice droppings, ample evidence of rodent infestation – all conditions primed to cause illness.

At Middle School 137 in Ozone Park, where the kitchen prepares more than 700 meals for five schools in the area, an inspector found, on July 12, about 1,500 flies. The Health Department gave the school two days to clean up and make sure food was in rat-proof containers. Inspectors would come back to ensure the work was done right.

It was not. While there was some improvement, when an inspector returned July 17, flies still loomed and the kitchen was still dirty. The school got another two days to fix the violations. Only on the third try were the problems fixed.

At P.S. 132 in Brooklyn, a school nurse reported in September that five second-graders were sickened after eating a cafeteria lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cheese sandwiches and milk.

While school officials said there was no evidence the illnesses were caused by school food and called the nurse “overzealous,” a health inspector responded several days later and found dirty equipment and poor protection for how food was laid out – more violations that could lead to foodborne illnesses.

These schools are far from alone. A NYCity News Service investigation, based on inspection data obtained under New York’s freedom of information law from the New York City Health Department, found:

- Every time city health inspectors go into New York City schools, agency data shows they find an average of two violations.
- One of every five of the citations is a critical violation – something that could well lead to foodborne illnesses like salmonella. More than half of these

violations are for evidence of mice and other rodents in food areas, along with flies and roaches.

- The four dozen schools with the worst inspections in 2017 are largely among the poorest in New York. The students who go there tend to be disproportionately from minority groups, city records show.

These findings come at a time when the city is now offering free meals to all 1.1 million children in city schools. Officials promised a year ago to improve the cleanliness at schools. The most recent Health Department inspections, as of mid-October show 2017, are no different than the last five years.

School officials and principals did not respond to repeated requests by phone and in writing for comment about the cleanliness of its cafeterias. That included a list of specific findings from public records about violations.

A top union official said a key problem is that cafeterias are short-staffed – a problem only worsened by the new demand to produce more meals under the free lunch program, but promised staffing to do the work is still underway.

None of this surprised students. The NYCity News Service spoke to more than a dozen students at schools with some of the worst cafeterias.

Angel Rosario recalled eating mozzarella sticks from the school cafeteria for Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx. Soon after eating, he felt queasy. His family took him to a doctor.

Rosario recalled that the doctor's diagnosis was food poisoning. He did not report it to the school because it did not surprise him that cafeteria food would make him sick.

Now he no longer eats at the school. "I used to just sit there and wait till lunch is over," said Rosario, now a senior. "Sometimes I didn't eat, I waited till I got home. It made my stomach hurt, and made me go home cranky."

Samara Henry, a senior at the same school, said, “The school lunch slogan is feed your mind, and I feel like if anything, we’re not feeding our minds. It’s a bunch of crap that is actually going into our system which makes us sick at the end of the day.”

While Henry did not recall an instance where the food had made her ill, in its most recent inspection, the Health Department found five critical violations at the school cafeteria, including evidence of mice, flying insects and workers not wearing the right clothing to prevent the spread of disease.

UNION SAYS SHORT STAFFED

Shaun D. Francois, President of Local 372, the union representing school food workers, worked four years as a school food handler and until 2014 as a school food distributor at a Long Island City warehouse.

He said a key problem is there are not enough workers at the aging school cafeterias. “My members are doing the best they can do. I say they could be better,” Francois said. “For mice droppings, because of staffing, they can’t clean because they’re busy running around serving kids.”

He said kitchens were already understaffed before the city introduced its free lunch program for all students this year. City schools planned to hire at least 400 workers to handle the increased demand, and have hosted hiring sessions with 2,000 prospective employees. But Francois said the positions have not all been filled, leaving staff stretched thin this semester.

School cafeteria inspections are similar to the ones for restaurants except there are no letter grades. No placards are posted by school cafeterias with an A, B, C or “Grade Pending.” Instead, a numeric scale tracks the count and severity of violations. The higher the number, the worse the conditions.

Inspectors are supposed to visit without warning and examine the kitchen. They look for evidence of rodents and insects. They check whether equipment can keep hot food hot

enough, and cold food cool enough – the right temperatures are crucial to avoid the spread of bacteria. They ask workers questions and review food handling.

If the results are bad, health inspectors may schedule a mandatory re-examination a few days later. More than a dozen city schools faced – including MS 137 in Ozone Park – faced that situation in 2017.

[Federal law requires](#) local health inspectors across the country to inspect school cafeterias twice a year. By mid-October, roughly 1,380 city school cafeterias have been inspected at least once. Some cafeterias serve several schools, and the Health Department said its 15 inspectors are able to inspect all facilities.

A former city health inspector, Olga Glazman, said critical violations are possible harbingers of foodborne illnesses like salmonella, listeria and norovirus.

“I would be very worried if I see droppings. Mice contaminate surfaces and food, for example they can chew flour and grain packages, they spread viruses,” she said.

Even if vermin encounter poison traps, they might not die immediately and instead may walk to food, now spreading dangerous chemicals.

Inspectors check for other violations that also affect food safety, including whether food is stored in vermin-proof containers and if kitchens in general are well maintained. To be sure, New York City schools did make one improvement in the past year, providing more information online about the cleanliness of kitchens. Anyone can look up a school’s cafeteria online to see violations. This was done in December to comply with a new state law.

But the reports are not complete. The NY City News Service used the state freedom of information law to obtain reports from the city Department of Health. The city health department conducts its inspections independent from the school district. The process to obtain full inspection reports itself takes weeks.

The full reports include details not on the school's new web pages, like the severity of violations, whether the cafeteria was so bad it faced a mandatory re-inspection in a few days to see if health concerns have been addressed.

While health inspectors routinely find critical violations at New York City schools, what remains less clear is how often they lead to outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. The science for confirming those cases takes time, and the victims may not be certain which meal is causing their discomfort.

More than one in six people in the U.S. get sick from a foodborne illness every year, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control.

There have been at least five suspected outbreaks of food-borne illnesses reported in public schools across city in the past two years, according to news accounts and Department of Education statements at the time.

More than 200 children across New York complained about stomach pains or have had to leave school because of illness.

Almost all the cases were suspected to stem from norovirus. Although norovirus can be spread through human contact, Health Department inspections conducted after some, but not all, outbreaks did not find that sick school food workers or evidence of foodborne illness. [That does not mean cafeteria conditions were not responsible for an outbreak](#), but only that health workers could not confirm a connection.

But in all of the schools where outbreaks were suspected, subsequent inspections after the cases uncovered health department violations. That included critical health violations that could have prevented the spread of disease, like having properly cleaned utensils and not having flying insects in food areas.

In addition, there were at least four other cases across the city in the past two years where complaints emerged about public schools serving moldy pizza, bones in chicken tenders and metal in popcorn chicken.

FOOD AND SCHOOLWORK

Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters is not the only school with violations where students claim the quality of the food has affected their coursework.

At I.S. 218 in Fort George, Manhattan, also known as The Salome Urena de Henriquez School, an earlier inspection found problems so severe that the cafeteria was told to clean up and face immediate re-inspection. Even on the second visit, in late July, an inspector found a severe roach problem and lesser violations.

A half dozen freshman interviewed said they refuse to eat lunch from the cafeteria not only because it was not appetizing, but the cafeteria appeared dirty and they have spotted roaches.

Jonathan Campos said that after he ate the cafeteria's macaroni the day before the state test, he threw up and got sick. He could not get to school the next day and missed the first round of testing.