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NY Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond

The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center

The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute

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NY FOOD 20/20

Vision, Research, and Recommendations
During COVID-19 and Beyond





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About the collaborating organizations

The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, is an academic research center located on Hunter College's East Harlem Campus in the School of Urban Public Health. Through interdisciplinary research, policy analysis, evaluation, and education, the Center's faculty and staff leverage the expertise and passion of the NYC food policy community. The Center develops innovative and evidence-based solutions to prevent diet-related diseases, promote food security, and build a resilient, regenerative, and equitable food system in NYC.

The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, based in the Program in Nutrition at Teachers College, Columbia University, conducts research on food and nutrition education practice and policy. The Tisch Food Center translates research into resources for educators, policy makers, and advocates to give people power to demand healthy, just, sustainable food.

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, a research and action center based at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy, provides evidence and advocacy that helps to create healthier, more sustainable, and equitable urban food systems. Its key staff have more than 100 years of shared experience analyzing food policies in NYC and the nation and assessing the impact of changing food policies and economic and political circumstances on a variety of scales. Its researchers bring interdisciplinary perspectives from public health, urban planning, sociology, and nutrition to their work.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	7
A Chronology of Key NYC, New York State, and Federal Food Policies in Response to COVID-19	10
Strengths and Weaknesses of NYC’s COVID-19 Response.....	10
Recommendations for Policy and System Changes to Increase Food System Stability.....	12
Introduction: The COVID-19 Crisis Changed New York City’s Food System	14
Existing Food System Inequities Exacerbated COVID-19’s Impact in NYC	17
COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter Protests Highlight the Need for More Equitable Food Policies and Practices.....	18
Policy Primer: Prior Policies Set the Stage for Current Challenges	20
The City Food Standards, Food Metrics Reporting Law, and Mayor’s Office of Food Policy Serve as Key Governance Structures.....	20
Prior to the COVID-19 Crisis, NYC Leaders Acknowledged the Need for Stronger, More Equitable Food Policies.....	23
During the COVID-19 Crisis, Policy Changes at the Federal and State Levels Enabled NYC to Adapt Food Services for Its Vulnerable Residents.....	24
NYC Agencies Took on the Herculean Task of Reaching Two Million Food-Insecure New Yorkers.....	28
Recommendations to Strengthen Food Policies and Governance.....	29
Food Insecurity: Despite Efforts, NYC Struggled to Respond to Rapidly Rising Food Insecurity	32
The City Created New Institutional Meal Service Models to Prevent New Yorkers from Going Hungry.....	32
The Rapid Rise in Food Insecurity Necessitated an Overhaul of Emergency Feeding Programs.....	34
Despite Additional Resources, Food Pantries Struggled to Stay Open.....	35
Community Members Played a Crucial Role, Improving Neighborhood Food Access.....	35
Accessing Emergency Food Resources Was Challenging for NYC Residents.....	37
Many Individuals Struggled to Find Information About Available Food Resources.....	37
Recommendations to Reduce Food Insecurity.....	38
Food Retail and Restaurants: NYC Residents’ Food Purchasing Patterns Changed During the COVID-19 Crisis	40
Changes to the Food Retail Environments Impacted How, Where, and When New Yorkers Bought Food.....	40
Pre-Pandemic Inequities Food Purchasing and Consumption Patterns Were Exacerbated, Compromising Vulnerable Shoppers.....	41
Sales at Direct Markets Grew.....	43
Restaurants Suffered, Especially Independent Restaurants and Women- and Minority-Owned Restaurants.....	44
Recommendations to Support Food Retail and Restaurants.....	45

Diet Quality: COVID-19 Influenced the Healthfulness and Affordability of New Yorkers’ Diets	47
The Food Environment Influences Our Health.....	47
Programs to Support Healthy Eating Adapted and Moved Online, Yet Data on Impacts on Diet Quality Are Limited.....	48
Shifts in Service Models for Institutional Meals Contributed to Uneven Access to Nutrition.....	49
NYC Needs More Information to Understand the Healthfulness of Foods Distributed through the Emergency Food System.....	51
Recommendations to Improve Diet Quality.....	51
Food Workforce: COVID-19 Changed Working Conditions, Pay, and Risk for the NYC Food Workforce	54
The Food Workforce Is Especially Vulnerable.....	54
Unemployment Hit the Restaurant Sector Hard.....	56
Despite Being Deemed Essential, Food Retail Workers Also Faced Difficulties.....	56
As Demand for Food Delivery Grew, So Too Did Jobs.....	57
Food Manufacturing, Production, and Distribution Jobs Remained Relatively Unharm.....	59
With Changes to the City’s Institutional and Emergency Food Programs, Workers’ Responsibilities Shifted.....	59
Federal and City Policies Have Not Adequately Protected Food Workers from Economic Harm.....	60
Recommendations to Protect Food Workers.....	60
Conclusion	63
Strengths and Weaknesses of NYC’s COVID-19 Response.....	63
Policy.....	63
Food Insecurity.....	63
Food Retail and Restaurants.....	64
Diet Quality.....	65
Food Workforce.....	65
Recommendations to Rebuild the Food System.....	65
Appendix: Methods	68
Hunter College NYC FPC Interviews with NYC Residents During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	68
Hunter College NYC FPC Food Pantry Opening and Closing Data.....	68
The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute Food Retail Survey.....	69
Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	69
The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy Survey of Food and Nutrition Education Organizations on the Impact of COVID-19.....	70

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

“At the beginning, when I did not know about this service that they [the City] deliver food to the house. I was going to the food pantry, but they always told me, ‘No children, you can’t bring children, just parents can come.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, but I don’t have anyone to leave them with.’”

“I had to be standing on a Tuesday, and it was raining, storms, and that’s how we had to wait. It didn’t matter because we needed food...And with children it is difficult. My oldest daughter told me, ‘Mommy, I don’t want to wait anymore. My feet hurt.’ And I had a mini chair for her to sit on, and I had my other daughter in the stroller, and that’s how it was.”

“While I was able to largely fill my shopping list, there were significantly fewer product choices than before the pandemic. Often what’s left are the most expensive options of a type of product. So on top of groceries being more expensive in general... many lower priced items are out of stock.”

“I am eating more vegetables because there are more vegetables in the food (deliveries from the City), and it has been good. I have changed my diet.”

“At my store...it’s confusing on how to even get [sick leave]. To them, if you call out, you’re sabotaging their day and their chance of making money.”

The public health and economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to the New York City (NYC) food system have been tremendous. In the six months since March 2020, when the pandemic reached NYC’s 5 boroughs, the number of food-insecure individuals has nearly doubled from 1.2 million to 2 million;¹ diet quality for many individuals has decreased;² the local food workforce has lost more than two-thirds of its workers;³ and more than 1,000 NYC restaurants and food retail outlets have closed,⁴ some never to re-open.

Too often the impacts of a crisis such as COVID-19 are not measured until long after the opportunity to implement policy and programmatic solutions has passed. In this report, researchers from three of NYC’s leading food policy and research institutions analyze COVID-19’s impact on NYC’s food system during the first six months of the pandemic. Our goal is to provide research-based recommendations for policies and programs that support food security, retail, quality, and the food workforce as the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold.

¹ Mann B. In NYC, 2 Million Residents Face Food Insecurity, Officials Say. *NPR*. May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-up-dates/2020/05/21/860312565/in-new-york-city-2-million-residents-face-food-insecurity-officials-say>.

² Wilkins JL. Challenges and Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2020;52(7):669-670. doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2020.05.005

³ Fortney L. New Data Confirms NYC’s Service Workers Are Most Vulnerable to COVID-19, Including in Food. *New York Eater*. April 2, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/2/21204275/nyc-food-service-workers-covid-19-vulnerable>.

⁴ Fortney L. No One Knows How Many Restaurants Have Closed in New York City. *New York Eater*. August 13, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/8/12/21336334/nyc-closings-lookback-coronavirus-pandemic-2020>.

Researchers from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education, and Policy; and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute prepared this report based on primary data collected from:

- Interviews with NYC residents on their experiences with the food system during COVID-19
- A survey of 1000 NYC residents, conducted weekly for 13 weeks, on the impact of COVID-19 on various health indicators, experiences, and behaviors
- A survey of more than 300 NYC residents, conducted over the course of 13 weeks, exploring the availability of food at local retailers
- Direct phone and email interviews with community organizations, emergency food providers, and NYC policy makers
- Direct phone calls to food pantries to track operational status and emergency food access points

As NYC moves into the COVID-19 pandemic's next phase, our city has the opportunity to reimagine NYC's food policies and programs to ensure that we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic with a stronger, healthier, more just, and sustainable food system.

A copy of the full report is available [here](#).

Key Findings

- Food-related policies and programs were not designed to deal with challenges of the scale COVID-19 created.
- The pandemic highlighted long standing tensions between the City's actions to ensure that NYC residents have *enough to eat* and that they have the *right foods to eat well*, despite strong food standards and the public's awakening to the threats of diet-related diseases.
- Lack of coordination and communication about available food resources slowed and stymied food distribution efforts to NYC residents in need.⁵
- Food insecurity remains a persistent problem and will continue to worsen as long as the pandemic continues to create public health and economic challenges.⁶ Specific populations remain particularly vulnerable: immigrants,⁷ small food business owners,⁸ food workers,⁹ and children who exist in households below the federal poverty level who rely on schools for the bulk of their meals.¹⁰

⁵ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

⁶ Bufkin A & Kimiagar B. More Resources Are Needed to Combat Food Insecurity in New York and Across the Country. *Citizen's Committee for Children of New York*. July 2, 2020. <https://www.ccnny.org/blog/more-resources-are-needed-to-combat-food-insecurity-in-new-york-and-across-the-country>.

⁷ Amandolare S, Gallagher L, Bowles J, and Dvorkin E. *Under Threat & Left Out: NYC's Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis*. Center for an Urban Future. June 2020. <https://nycfuture.org/research/under-threat-and-left-out>.

⁸ Haag M. One-Third of New York's Small Businesses May Be Gone Forever. *The New York Times*. August 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/nyregion/nyc-small-businesses-closing-coronavirus.html>.

⁹ Fortney L. New Data Confirms NYC's Service Workers Are Most Vulnerable to COVID-19, Including in Food. *New York Eater*. April 2, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/2/21204275/nyc-food-service-workers-covid-19-vulnerable>.

¹⁰ Bufkin A & Kimiagar B. More Resources Are Needed to Combat Food Insecurity in New York and Across the Country. *Citizen's Committee for Children of New York*. July 2, 2020. <https://www.ccnny.org/blog/more-resources-are-needed-to-combat-food-insecurity-in-new-york-and-across-the-country>.

A Chronology of Key NYC, New York State, and Federal Food Policies in Response to COVID-19

A Chronology of Key NYC, New York State, and Federal Food Policies in Response to COVID-19

Strengths and Weaknesses of NYC's COVID-19 Response

An assessment of the first six months of NYC's COVID-19 response shows both the City's strengths and weaknesses.

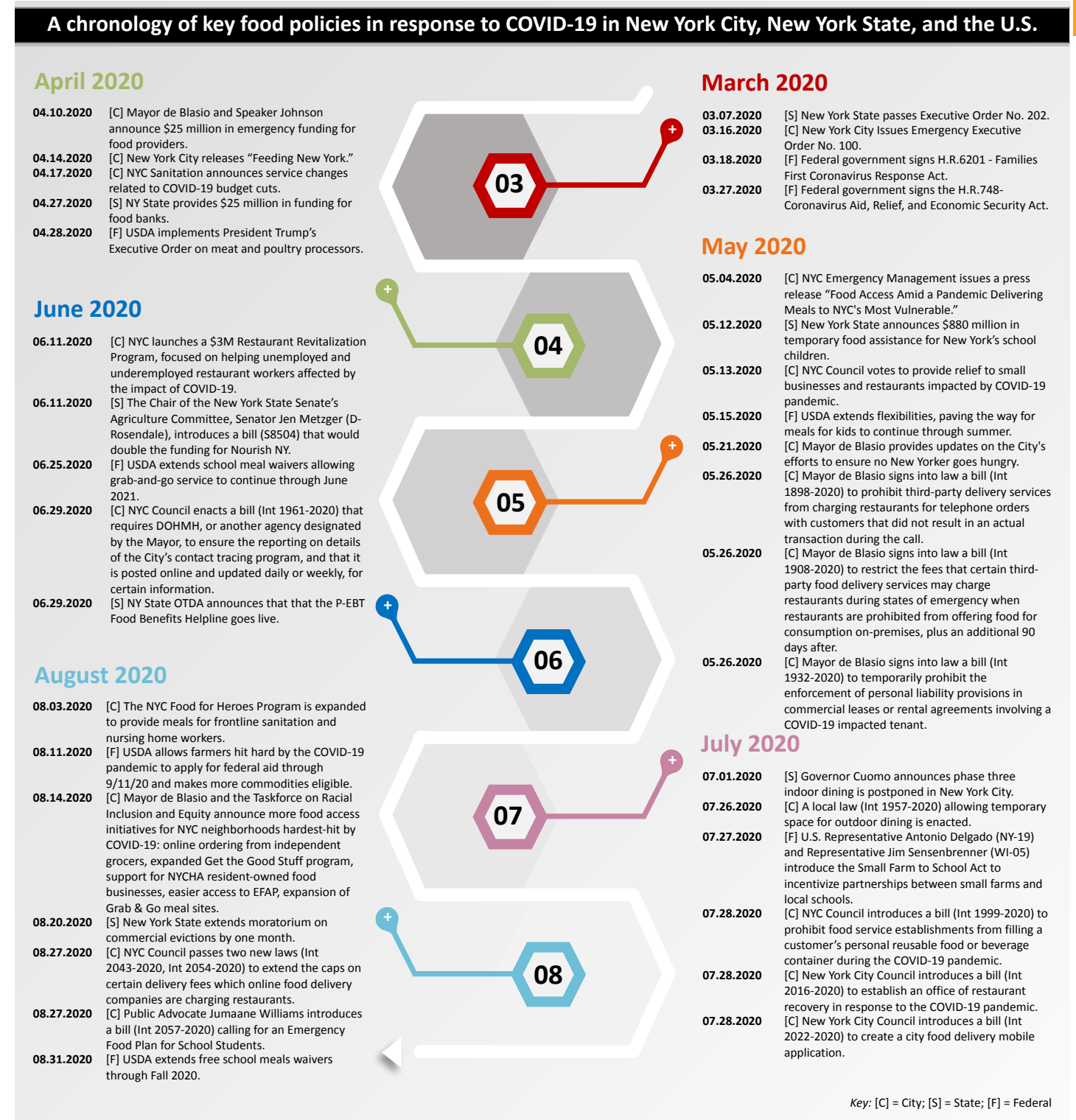
NYC and local non-profits acted aggressively and quickly to make more food available using traditional and new approaches. Despite the financial constraints that the pandemic created, NYC developed significant, new resources to address food insecurity.^{11,12,13} The City's responses helped many households avoid or reduce food insecurity.

City government and community-based organizations provided millions of free meals to all NYC residents.¹⁴ The City's bold approach to ensuring all its residents have access to food recognizes that food is a basic right, not to be offered and then withdrawn at whim or available only for those deemed worthy of assistance.¹⁵ Whether the progress towards establishing food as a basic right can be sustained and amplified is a critical question in the pandemic's next stage.

The response to the increased food insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed cracks in NYC's food system. Despite its efforts, rates of food insecurity nearly doubled,¹⁶ suggesting that more robust, comprehensive policies and programs are needed to stabilize and reduce growing food insecurity.

Both before and during the pandemic, a significant portion of food security efforts have depended on charity. Charitable organizations have helped hundreds of thousands of NYC residents to cope with food insecurity, but, over the past 50 years, they have not reduced the scope of the problem or advanced a vision of a hunger-free city.¹⁷ These systems fail to address the fundamental causes of food insecurity—persistent rates of poverty, high numbers of low-wage workers,

Figure 1: A Chronology of Key NYC, New York State, and Federal Food Policies in Response to COVID-19



¹¹ The City of New York. *Feeding New York: The Plan for Keeping Our City Fed During the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/reports/2020/Feeding-New-York.pdf>.

¹² New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. *Nourish New York Initiative*. 2020. <https://agriculture.ny.gov/NourishNY#:~:text=The%20program%20provides%20%2425%20million,York%20State%20farms%20and%20processors>.

¹³ The City of New York. *Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Johnson Announce \$25 Million in Emergency Funding for Food Providers*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/245-20/mayor-de-blasio-speaker-johnson-25-million-emergency-funding-food-providers>.

¹⁴ CBS New York. *New York City Reaches 'Proud, Sad' Pandemic Milestone, Distributing 100 Million Free Meals to Those in Need*. CBS New York. July 21, 2020. <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2020/07/21/new-york-city-reaches-proud-sad-pandemic-milestone-distributing-100-million-free-meals-to-those-in-need/>.

¹⁵ Anderson M. *Beyond Food Security to Realizing Food Rights in the US*. *Journal of Rural Studies*. 29, 113-233, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.09.004>

¹⁶ Mann B. *In NYC, 2 Million Residents Face Food Insecurity, Officials Say*. *NPR*. May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/21/860312565/in-new-york-city-2-million-residents-face-food-insecurity-officials-say>.

¹⁷ Shirvell B. *Should Emergency Food Be the Long-Term Solution to Hunger?* Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center. October 29, 2019. <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/should-emergency-food-be-the-long-term-solution-to-hunger/>.

a limited public food sector, and growing income and wealth inequality.¹⁸

The coordinating mechanisms established by the City, such as the Food Czar Team, were an important step in the right direction. They helped address NYC's previous failures to focus the intense, ongoing coordination needed to tackle food security. Yet the lack of a coordinated system prior to the pandemic, despite warnings in the wake of past emergencies,¹⁹ suggests that many continue to believe that high levels of food insecurity are an inevitable fact of life in the world's wealthiest city.

Recommendations for Policy and System Changes to Increase Food System Stability

In the long run, NYC needs to tackle the fundamental causes of food insecurity, persistent poverty, and growing income inequality. In the short run, New York City can take these steps to better address the current pandemic:

- Strengthen and expand the Mayor's Office of Food Policy. The Office of Food Policy should exercise the same overarching, inter-agency power that the Food Czar team exercised. With clear authority, adequate funding, and staff who have deep understanding of food programs and policies, NYC could more nimbly respond to future crises.
- For users, create and maintain a public dataset of all food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency food resources that includes up-to-date information on openings, closings, and hours of operation. NYC should provide simple technologies for emergency food providers to easily update their status.

- Expand economic stimulus support, focusing on small food businesses that women, people of color, and immigrants own and operate.
- Monitor retail, institutional food, and emergency food programs' impact on diet quality and address nutrition-related inequities which occur because of income and race.
- Develop food plans for future emergencies that include concrete steps to support high quality diets.
- Ensure that all local, state, and federal benefit programs for workers are accessible to all food workers, especially those with the lowest pay and least benefits.

¹⁸ Shirvell B. Should Emergency Food Be the Long-Term Solution to Hunger? Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center. October 29, 2019. <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/should-emergency-food-be-the-long-term-solution-to-hunger/>.

¹⁹ The City of New York. *Five Borough Food Flow: 2016 New York City Food Distribution and Resiliency Study Results*. 2016. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016_food_supply_resiliency_study_results.pdf.

Introduction: The COVID-19 Crisis Changed New York City's Food System

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On March 16, 2020, public life in NYC ground to a halt when Mayor de Blasio issued a series of COVID-19 emergency orders to “protect the security, well-being, and health of the residents of the City.”²⁰ On March 22, 2020, Governor Cuomo announced the “New York State on PAUSE” Executive Order requiring all non-essential businesses to close, cancelling non-essential gatherings, and implementing a series of social distancing rules for essential businesses and service providers.²¹

Among the most widespread disruptions that COVID-19 caused are those to the local and regional food systems. In just a few weeks, the pandemic significantly altered and increased food insecurity in NYC. The pandemic affected where and how NYC residents access food, what foods they purchase and eat, as well as food workers’ wages, working conditions, health, and safety.

While NYC’s food system has experienced past disruptions from Hurricane Sandy and the 2008 Great Recession, few events in recent history are likely to have compromised the food system more drastically than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, many people in NYC, the world’s wealthiest city,²² struggled with hunger, diet-related diseases, low-wages, and risky working conditions. In 2019, more than 1.2 million NYC residents were food-insecure or lacked adequate access to food. Low-income communities of color had the highest rates of food insecurity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity.²³ These communities had the largest number of people without healthy, affordable food access, as well as the highest proportions of food workers in the lowest paid, riskiest jobs.²⁴

To solve its food problems NYC has developed numerous programs and policies. Its school food program, the largest in the nation, provides free, healthy food to all 1.1 million students.²⁵ Its Department of Health and Mental Hygiene operates programs that subsidize fruit and vegetable purchases for low-income families such as *Health Bucks*²⁶ and *Get the Good Stuff*,²⁷ and its Economic Development Corporation

offers tax incentives to lower the costs of owning, leasing, developing, and renovating supermarket retail space.²⁸

NYC and New York State, in partnership with numerous community organizations, faith-based institutions, and nonprofit organizations, have also constructed one of the nation’s most extensive and robust emergency food programs—programs that provided more than 58 million meals²⁹ and distributed more than 63 million pounds of food in 2019.³⁰

Collectively, these initiatives gave NYC a strong foundation to cope with the food consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. NYC government’s response has been swift and massive, but the need is still great. The ensuing economic crisis will likely have long-lasting, negative effects.

In this report, three of New York’s leading food policy research centers—the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center; the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education and Policy; and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute—provide an in-depth analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on NYC’s food system. The three Centers collectively present evidence-based recommendations for reimagining food practices, programs, and policies. Our goal is to promote a stronger food system that ensures food equity and access for all NYC residents.

Specifically, we explore:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the following food issues in NYC?

- Food insecurity, hunger, and the capacity of the City’s many food programs
- The quality, healthfulness, and cost of NYC residents’ diets
- The retail food and restaurant systems
- Food workers’—especially low-wage food workers’—pay, working conditions, health, and safety

- How have national and state level COVID-19 responses affected the City’s response?
- To what extent have federal, state, city, and community responses to food issues influenced socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and other inequities in NYC?
- What lessons have we learned that could help address the underlying food-inequities?
- What from the City’s response could guide future actions from policy makers, advocates, and community leaders?

In this first report of NY Food 20/20, we summarize the available, sometimes limited evidence of the pandemic’s impact and economic consequences on NYC’s food system from March through August 2020. We decided to prioritize timeliness over completeness to provide insights that can inform decisions being made now. Our goal is to provide a baseline against which we can measure the impact of subsequent responses.

We conclude with recommendations that policy makers, advocates, and community leaders can use to minimize the harms and maximize the opportunities to address food system problems. We are especially interested in actions that can shrink food system inequities that low-income communities of color shoulder.

²⁸ NYC Economic Development Corporation. Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH). <https://edc.nyc.gov/program/food-retail-expansion-support-health-fresh>.

²⁹ Food Bank for New York City. Research, Reports, and Financials: Fast Facts. 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/research-reports/>.

³⁰ Feeding America. Find Your Local Food Bank: City Harvest. 2020. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank/city-harvest>.

²⁰ The City of New York Office of the Mayor. Emergency Executive Order No. 107. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/executive-orders/2020/eeo-107.pdf>

²¹ New York State Office of the Governor. *Governor Cuomo Issues Guidance on Essential Services Under The 'New York State On PAUSE.'* 2020. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-issues-guidance-essential-services-under-new-york-state-pause-executive-order#:~:text=Earlier%20today%2C%20Governor%20Andrew%20M.8PM%20on%20Sunday%2C%20March%2022>.

²² Block F. New York City Is The World’s Wealthiest, With US\$3 Trillion In Total Wealth. *Barron’s*. October 10, 2019. <https://www.barrons.com/articles/new-york-city-is-the-worlds-wealthiest-with-us-3-trillion-in-total-wealth-01570741727>

²³ New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson. Growing Food Equity in New York City: A City Council Agenda. 2020. <http://council.nyc.gov/data/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2019/08/growing-food-equity-1.pdf>

²⁴ Fiscal Policy Institute. The Racial Dimension of New York’s Income Inequality. 2017. <http://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Racial-Dimension-of-Income-Inequality.pdf>

²⁵ The Editorial Board. School Lunch Without Shame. *The New York Times*. September 8, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/opinion/school-lunch-without-shame.html?_r=0

²⁶ New York City Department of Health. Health Bucks. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/health-bucks.page>.

²⁷ New York City Department of Health. Free Fruits, Vegetables and Beans at Supermarkets with SNAP/EBT. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/free-produce-snap.page>.

Existing Food System Inequities Exacerbated COVID-19's Impact in NYC

Existing Food System Inequities Exacerbated COVID-19's Impact in NYC

As the COVID-19 virus spread in early March 2020, a confluence of factors such as comorbidities, occupational exposure, and poverty placed communities of color and low-income populations at higher risk of exposure, infection, and death.³¹

Findings from a national survey of low-income adults indicated that food-insecure individuals were especially vulnerable to the pandemic's severe economic and health consequences.³² In NYC, zip code data released in April 2020 by NYC's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) showed that poorer, more densely populated neighborhoods with more public housing had the highest death rates from COVID-19.³³ Latinx NYC residents accounted for 34% of the deaths despite comprising 29% of the City's population. Black residents accounted for 28% of deaths even though they make up 22% of the population, and White residents accounted for 27% of deaths though

they comprise 32% of the population. Information released by the City showed that the death rate was twice as high for Latinx and Black residents who contracted COVID-19 as it was for White residents.³⁴

Prior to COVID-19, nearly 14% of NYC residents were food-insecure, and access to fresh, healthy, affordable food varied by race, ethnicity, and income.³⁵ Low-income communities of color faced a food sector stacked against their interests including:

- **Fractured food retail landscape**—Lower-income communities are often subject to the one-two punch of retailer redlining and food gentrification. Retailer redlining, the historic disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods of color, often results in fewer outlets with limited choices of healthy options.³⁶ New stores that do open in these neighborhoods may provide healthier options, but the cost of food is often prohibitive.^{37,38}
- **Increased surveillance**—Heightened security in food stores in gentrifying neighborhoods, often targeted at people of color, can make customers feel unwelcome and uncomfortable.³⁹
- **Predatory marketing**—Manufacturers weaponize aggressive, emotional, and sometimes misleading advertising strategies to push unhealthy, ultra-processed products like sugar sweetened beverages and fast food in low-income communities of color.^{40,41}

³¹ Arasteh K. *Prevalence of Comorbidities and Risks Associated with COVID-19 Among Black and Hispanic Populations in NYC: an Examination of the 2018 NYC Community Health Survey*. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. 2020.

³² Wolfson JA & Leung CW. *Food Insecurity and COVID-19: Disparities in Early Effects for US Adults*. *Nutrients*. 2020; 12(6):1648.

³³ NYC Health. *COVID-19: Data*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>

³⁴ NYC Health. *Age Adjusted Rate of Fatal Lab Confirmed COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 by Race/Ethnicity Group*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-04082020-1.pdf>.

³⁵ The City of New York Mayor's Office for Food Policy. *Food Metrics Report*. 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Policy-Report-2019.pdf>.

³⁶ D'Rozario D & Williams JD. *Retail Redlining: Definition, Theory, Typology, and Measurement*. *Journal of Macromarketing*. 2005; 25(2):175-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146705280632>

³⁷ Cohen N. *Feeding or Starving Gentrification: The Role of Food Policy*. CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. 2018. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2018/3/27/feeding-or-starving-gentrification-the-role-of-food-policy>.

³⁸ Eisenhower E. In Poor Health: Supermarket Redlining and Urban Nutrition. *GeoJournal*. 2001:125-133. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015772503007>

³⁹ Zukin S, Trujillo V, Frase P, Jackson D, Recuber T, Walker A. New Retail Capital and Neighborhood Change: Boutiques and Gentrification in NYC. *City & Community*. 2009 Mar;8(1):47-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6040.2009.01269.x>

⁴⁰ Powell LM, Wada R, Kumanyika SK. Racial/Ethnic and Income Disparities in Child and Adolescent Exposure to Food and Beverage Television Ads Across U.S. Media Markets. *Health and Place*. 2014. 29: 124-131. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.06.006>.

⁴¹ Public Health Institute. *How Marketers Target Communities of Color with Junk Food and Sugary Drinks*. 2015. <https://www.phi.org/press/how-marketers-target-communities-of-color-with-junk-food-and-sugary-drinks/>.

Together these phenomena have led to what some scholars have labeled “food apartheid.”⁴² Food apartheid refers to a food system that offers more positive choices and experiences to White, more affluent individuals and fewer choices and higher prices to low-income people of color.⁴³ Failure to adequately address these food system fractures predating the pandemic exacerbated the present crisis and likely will have a devastating impact on communities for years to come.

“Low-income communities of color, metaphorically speaking, get pneumonia when more affluent, predominantly white communities catch cold. The pandemic has exacerbated differences related to race, ethnicity, class, and income, for low-income people of color are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and face a greater likelihood of negative outcomes that stem from it. For many people who have historically been marginalized or neglected, the COVID-19 experience has further rendered them invisible.”

Survey respondent

COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter Protests Highlight the Need for More Equitable Food Policies and Practices

Growing social unrest, fueled by COVID-19, and blown open by the murder of George Floyd ignited national protests.⁴⁴ Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to call for an end to police brutality and racial injustice.⁴⁵ Intensified calls for racial equality were not limited to police brutality; these protests galvanized activists across the social justice spectrum. Black leaders reiterated the need for an end to the discriminatory structures within the healthcare, food, and agricultural sectors,⁴⁶ and many food organizations publicly acknowledged the role that racism has played in food access, diet-related diseases, and relatedly, complications from the COVID-19 virus.⁴⁷ Together, the momentum from Black Lives Matter protests and a growing sense of responsibility within the food movement represent an opportunity to reimagine food practices and policies within NYC.

Policy Primer: Prior Policies Set the Stage for Current Challenges

⁴² Brones A. Food Apartheid: The Root of the Problem with America’s Groceries. *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/15/food-apartheid-food-deserts-racism-inequality-america-karen-washington-interview>.

⁴³ Bower KM, Thorpe RJ, Rohde C, and Gaskin DJ. The Intersection of Neighborhood Racial Segregation, Poverty, and Urbanicity and its Impact on Food Store Availability in the United States. *Preventative Medicine*. 2014; 58:33-29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2013.10.010>.

⁴⁴ Bryson TD. George Floyd Protests: A Timeline. *New York Times*. July 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>.

⁴⁵ Fougere D. NYC George Floyd Protests Continue for 14th Straight Day. *New York 1*. June 10, 2020. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2020/06/10/new-york-city-george-floyd-protests-june-10>.

⁴⁶ Matsumoto M. An Intergenerational Juneteenth Gathering Shows How the Black Food Sovereignty Discussion Has Shifted. *Civil Eats*. June 24, 2020. <https://civileats.com/2020/06/24/an-intergenerational-juneteenth-gathering-shows-how-the-black-food-sovereignty-discussion-has-shifted/>.

⁴⁷ Civil Eats. Black Lives Matter in the Food System. *Civil Eats*. July 20, 2020. <https://civileats.com/2020/07/20/black-lives-matter-in-the-food-system/>.

Policy Primer: Prior Policies Set the Stage for Current Challenges

This section provides an overview of the NYC executive branch's initial responses, from March 16 through August 2020, to support food security, diet quality, retail access, and labor food during the COVID-19 crisis. More specifically, it details:

- Important NYC food policies and practices that existed prior to COVID-19,
- Federal, state, and city legislative and regulatory changes that enabled the City to adapt its services, and
- Recommendations to strengthen food policies and planning.

The City Food Standards, Food Metrics Reporting Law, and Mayor's Office of Food Policy Serve as Key Governance Structures

NYC operates some of the largest, most wide-reaching municipal food programs, supported by a web of federal, state, and

city rules that define program goals, funding, participants, and activities. Working within the parameters of these policies, NYC serves approximately 230 million meals and snacks a year at schools, daycares, senior centers, public hospitals, homeless shelters, and supportive housing sites.⁴⁸ The City draws federal, state, and city funds for this purpose. Its food spending is second only to the U.S. Department of Defense.⁴⁹ See Table 1.

Data, unless otherwise indicated, are from the *Food Metrics Report 2019*.⁵⁰ Data on funding are from *Supplement to New York City's Public Plate: Agencies at a Glance*.⁵¹

The quality of meals and snacks that NYC purchases and serves exceed federal and state nutrition requirements, thanks to the *Agency Standards for Meals/ Snacks Purchased and Served* (City Food Standards).⁵² Established by 2008 Executive Order 122,⁵³ the City Food Standards aim to decrease NYC resident's risks of diet-related diseases by requiring healthier beverages such as skim milk and water, increasing fruit and vegetable servings, upping fiber content, lowering sodium content, and eliminating deep frying.

The Annual City Food System Metrics Reporting law requires agencies to disclose their food-related activities to improve procurement, service, healthy food access,

and healthy food awareness.⁵⁴ In the annual *City Food Metrics Report*, the 10 NYC agencies that routinely purchase and serve institutional meals publish the number of meals and snacks they serve and document their compliance with the City Food Standards allowing stakeholders to monitor annual trends.⁵⁵ See Table 1.

The Mayor's Office of Food Policy, established by the same executive order as the City Food Standards,⁵⁶ publishes the annual *City Food Metrics Report*, manages an interagency food task force, and coordinates emergency food capacity via the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative.⁵⁷ The Office's goal is to "increase food security, promote access to and awareness of healthy food, and support economic opportunity and environmental sustainability in the food system."⁵⁸



⁴⁸ The City of New York Mayor's Office for Food Policy. *Food Metrics Report*. 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Policy-Report-2019.pdf>.

⁴⁹ The City of New York. *Five Borough Food Flow: 2016 New York City Food Distribution and Resiliency Study Results*. 2016. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016_food_supply_resiliency_study_results.pdf.

⁵⁰ The City of New York Mayor's Office for Food Policy. *Food Metrics Report*. 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Policy-Report-2019.pdf>.

⁵¹ New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College. *Supplement to New York City's Public Plate: Agencies at a Glance*. 2014. <https://www.nyc-foodpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/PUBLICPLATESUPP.pdf>.

⁵² New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *New York City Food Standards: Meals/Snacks Purchased and Served*. 2017. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/cardio/cardio-meals-snacks-standards.pdf>.

⁵³ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Executive Order No. 122. Food Policy Coordinator for the City of New York and City Agency Food Standards*. September 19, 2008. http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/eo/eo_122.pdf.

⁵⁴ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Administrative Code § 3-120. Annual City Food System Metrics Report*. <https://nycadmincode.readthedocs.io/t03/c01/sch02/>.

⁵⁵ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *New York City Food Standards: Meals/Snacks Purchased and Served*. 2017. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/cardio/cardio-meals-snacks-standards.pdf>.

⁵⁶ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Executive Order No. 122. Food Policy Coordinator for the City of New York and City Agency Food Standards*. September 19, 2008. http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/eo/eo_122.pdf.

⁵⁷ Johnson N, Vazquez A, Pond C et al. *Growing Food Equity in New York City: A City Council Agenda*. New York City Council. 2020. <http://council.nyc.gov/data/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2019/08/growing-food-equity-1.pdf>.

⁵⁸ NYC Food Policy. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/foodpolicy/about/nyc-food-policy.page>.

Table 1: Meals Served and/or Funded by NYC Agencies in 2019

New York City Agency	Population(s) Served	Setting(s)	Major Sources of Public Funding	Number of Meals and Snacks Served, 2019
Department of Education (DOE)	Children and youth	Schools that participate in child nutrition programs and community locations like parks, pools, and libraries	National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Child & Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), state tax levy, City tax levy	165,276,871
Administration for Children's Services (ACS)	Children and youth	Childcare, Head Start, and Division of Youth and Family Justice centers	Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP)	19,435,231
Department of Homeless Services (DHS)	Individuals who are homeless	Homeless shelters	Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Emergency Solutions Grants Program (ESG), state tax levy, City tax levy	14,032,210
Department for the Aging (DFTA)	Seniors	Homes and senior centers	Older Americans Act Senior Nutrition Program, City tax levy	11,032,839
Department of Correction (DOC)	Individuals who are incarcerated	Correctional and detention facilities	City tax levy	8,811,899
NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation (NYC H+H)	Patients	Public hospitals	Medicare, Medicaid	7,646,871
Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD)	Children and youth	Schools and New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) centers	Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	1,958,143
Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)	Individuals enrolled in DOHMH's mental health, substance abuse, and developmental disability services	Supportive housing	Assorted federal funds, state tax levy, City tax levy	1,493,222
Human Resources Administration (HRA)	Individuals participating in the HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) program	Supportive housing	Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS Program (HOPWA), City tax levy	566,151
Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR)	Children and youth	Parks	Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP), state tax levy, City tax levy	5,953
Total				230,259,390

Prior to the COVID-19 Crisis, NYC Leaders Acknowledged the Need for Stronger, More Equitable Food Policies

The governance structures that NYC has put in place—including the City Food Standards, Food Metrics, and Mayor’s Office of Food Policy—help to ensure NYC agencies distribute food benefits and serve healthy, accessible meals more equitably. However, there has been a growing recognition that existing food policies are failing NYC’s most vulnerable residents. For example, the *Five Borough Food Flow: 2016 New York City Food Distribution & Resiliency Study*, released in response to Hurricane Sandy, called for a “sounder, stronger, and more resilient” food distribution system, one that makes food readily accessible for all NYC residents. The authors warned that during emergencies, “consumers face additional vulnerabilities if they are low-income, lack mobility, face geographic isolation, or have limited choices of where to purchase food on a daily basis,”⁵⁹ foreshadowing the dire situation that the COVID-19 pandemic would create.

Less than a year before the COVID-19 pandemic hit NYC, the City Council Speaker’s Office released the report, *Growing Food Equity in New York City: A City Council Agenda*, highlighting many of the food policies that food advocates had been calling for.⁶⁰ Specifically, the document discussed the need to

- Strengthen the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy
- Update agency reporting requirements to make the Food Metrics data more useful for advocates
- Increase funding for emergency food, senior meals, and food aid to college students
- Advocate at the federal and state levels for anti-hunger and nutrition assistance.

In light of COVID-19, such proposals would prove to be more timely than anticipated.

“To advance food equity and justice, we need stronger food governance and better school food. We need to increase nutrition and farming education. We need to end hunger in higher education. We need to make healthy food more accessible to all New Yorkers, regardless of where they live.”

Growing Food Equity in New York City

⁵⁹ The City of New York. *Five Borough Food Flow: 2016 New York City Food Distribution and Resiliency Study Results*. 2016. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/2016_food_supply_resiliency_study_results.pdf.

⁶⁰ Johnson N, Vazquez A, Pond C et al. *Growing Food Equity in New York City: A City Council Agenda*. New York City Council. August, 2019. <http://council.nyc.gov/data/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2019/08/growing-food-equity-1.pdf>.



During the COVID-19 Crisis, Policy Changes at the Federal and State Levels Enabled NYC to Adapt Food Services for Its Vulnerable Residents

President Trump declared a national emergency in response to COVID-19 on March 13, 2020.⁶¹ Five days later, he signed the Families First Coronavirus Act (Families First Act) into law,⁶² enabling federal agencies to waive many program requirements and unlocking additional funding for many food programs. See Table 2.

Recognizing that the economic fallout from COVID-19 would be significant, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act less than two weeks later.⁶³ Of the roughly \$2 trillion in federal funding in the CARES stimulus package, \$25 billion was dedicated to food assistance.⁶⁴ Approximately \$16 billion of the \$25 billion went to support the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and another \$9 billion funded school meal programs. Notably, the CARES Act did not include a 15% emergency increase in SNAP benefits that food security advocates had called for.⁶⁵ See Table 2.

Table 2: Key Food Provisions in Federal Coronavirus Response Acts

Program	Families First Act	CARES Act
Child & Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The congregate feeding waiver suspended requirements that meals must be eaten on site, allowing states to automatically provide grab-and-go meals. The meal pattern waiver allowed USDA to waive requirements for nutrition standards if there were food shortages. 	
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The congregate feeding waiver suspended requirements that meals must be eaten on site, allowing states to automatically provide grab-and-go meals. The cost increase waiver allowed USDA to spend additional funds during the public health emergency. The meal pattern waiver allowed USDA to waive requirements for nutrition standards if there were food shortages. The area eligibility waiver enabled states to operate all meal sites as “open” sites without prior verification of eligibility, helping to ensure that low-income students in areas where poverty is less-concentrated could access meals Reporting requirements compelled states to submit a description of their use of waivers and whether waivers improved meal service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$8.8 billion for NSLP. Additional grants to school districts made funds available for planning and coordination during long-term closures. School districts could use a portion of their funds to determine how to provide meals to eligible students.
Older Americans Act Senior Nutrition Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$250 million for food. \$160 million was made available for home-delivered and pre-packaged meals for low-income homebound seniors, \$80 million for Congregate Nutrition Services, and the remaining \$10 million for Nutrition Services for Native Americans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$480 million for congregate and home-delivered meals and \$20 million for Nutrition Services for Native Americans.

⁶¹ Trump D. *Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak*. The White House. March 13, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>.

⁶² 116th Congress. H.R. 6201. *Families First Coronavirus Response Act*. March 18, 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bill/6201>.

⁶³ 116th Congress. H.R. 748. *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*. March 27, 2020. <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FINAL%20FINAL%20CARES%20ACT.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Laurie M Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University. *COVID-19 Federal Update: What the Stimulus Package Means for Federal Nutrition Programs*. March 31, 2020. <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/tisch/blog/news/covid-19-fed-update-what-the-stimulus-package-means-for-fed-nutrition-programs/>.

⁶⁵ Baker J. *Nearly 2,500 Organizations Urge Senate to Boost SNAP Benefits*. Food Research & Action Center. June 18, 2020. <https://frac.org/news/2500-organizations-urge-senate-to-invest-in-critical-federal-nutrition-programs>.

Program	Families First Act	CARES Act
Paycheck Protection Program		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program provided small businesses with funds to pay up to 8 weeks of payroll costs.
Pandemic Electronic Benefits Program (P-EBT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A novel program for families with children eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals was created to provide electronic benefit transfers (EBT) that equaled or exceeded the free meal rate per child. States had to apply to the USDA on behalf of families. An appropriation authorized \$100 million for nutrition assistance in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa. 	
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, & Children (WIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$500 million for the program. The remote issuance waiver enabled WIC agencies to issue benefits from a distance. The physical presence waiver allowed participants to enroll in WIC without visiting a clinic in person. 	
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The work and work training requirements for able-bodied dependents without disabilities (ABAWDs) were suspended. Usage during the suspension did not count towards ABAWDs' three-month SNAP allowance. Additional benefits allowed states to issue additional, emergency SNAP benefits up to the maximum monthly allotment Reporting requirements mandated that the USDA detail the steps taken to address food security needs during the emergency, data supporting states' requests, and any measures that the agency denied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$15.8 billion for SNAP; \$200 million for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa; and \$100 million for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).
The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized \$400 million for the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An appropriation authorized an additional \$450 million for the program.

Trump's national emergency declaration authorized the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to respond. The agency made its Public Assistance (PA) program available to states, territories, tribal nations, and local entities.⁶⁶ Through PA, FEMA reimburses local governments 75% of their public health costs. FEMA PA provided considerable funding for NYC's COVID-19 relief efforts,⁶⁷ specifically towards the *GetFoodNYC* initiative.

Another federal agency key to NYC's initial food response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the agency that oversees the federal government's main anti-hunger and nutrition programs. In April, the agency announced the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), directing \$19 billion to support farmers.⁶⁸ The program was a lifeline to emergency feeding programs across the nation. In addition, the USDA initially issued waivers, some on a nationwide basis,⁶⁹ that allowed states and localities to meet their citizens' needs with more flexibility. For example, the USDA waived in-person requirements for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women,

Infants, and Children (WIC), allowing clients to receive benefits remotely, rather than in-person.⁷⁰

When New York emerged as the early epicenter of the U.S. COVID-19 crisis, New York State agencies were among the first to apply to the USDA for food program waivers. For example, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) was the second state agency in the country to request support through the new Pandemic Electronic Benefits Program (P-EBT).⁷¹ P-EBT provided families with students cash on a government-issued card to purchase the same foods as are available through SNAP. In New York State, the approximately 2.1 million students who would have received a free or reduced-price school meal were eligible for \$420 in benefits—\$5.70 for each day last school year cafeterias were closed.⁷² Through P-EBT, New York distributed \$880 million in benefits,⁷³ an important infusion into the local economy.⁷⁴

When it became apparent that federal food efforts like P-EBT were inadequate to address rapidly rising rates of hunger, representatives from Governor Cuomo's Office advocated for additional support for

⁶⁶ U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency. *Eligible Emergency Protective Measures*. Last Updated July 27, 2020. <https://www.fema.gov/fact-sheet/eligible-emergency-protective-measures>.

⁶⁷ New York City Department of Sanitation. *Bid Book for Emergency Purchases of Goods: Older Adult Food Access Program*. June 1, 2020. <https://files.constantcontact.com/ef416ee8001/b72b60fa-0ca9-4494-9bbb-aa7105adb215.pdf>.

⁶⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *USDA Announces Coronavirus Food Assistance Program*. April 17, 2020. <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/17/usda-announces-coronavirus-food-assistance-program>.

⁶⁹ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Child Nutrition Programs: COVID-19 Waivers by State*. 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/cn-waivers-flexibilities>.

⁷⁰ Office of U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand. *Following Push From Gillibrand And Schumer, USDA Approves New York State's Pandemic EBT Program*. May 7, 2020. <https://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/news/press/release/gillibrand-schumer-urge-usda-to-approve-new-york-states-pandemic-ebt-program>.

⁷¹ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Child Nutrition Programs: COVID-19 Waivers by State*. 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/cn-waivers-flexibilities>.

⁷² Laurie M Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University. *P-EBT Benefits Enable NYC Students' Families to Buy More Food, Support Local Economies*. May 7, 2020. <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/tisch/blog/news/p-ebt-benefits-enable-nyc-students-families-to-buy-more-food/>.

⁷³ N.Y.S. Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. *New York State Announces \$880 Million in Temporary Food Assistance for New York's School Children*. May 12, 2020. <https://otda.ny.gov/news/2020/2020-05-12.asp>.

⁷⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Temporary SNAP Benefit Bump a No-Brainer for More Economic Stimulus*. April 8, 2020. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/temporary-snap-benefit-bump-a-no-brainer-for-more-economic-stimulus>.

anti-hunger and nutrition programs. With state funds, Cuomo launched *Nourish New York*, a \$25 million initiative to funnel surplus agricultural products to food banks across NYS.⁷⁵ Recognizing the initial investment was not enough, he authorized an additional \$1.5 million for the initiative in July 2020.⁷⁶ NYC foodbanks received approximately \$11 million in initiative funding.⁷⁷ State funding for food programs was especially important because most federal public benefit programs are not available to undocumented individuals.⁷⁸

NYC Agencies Took on the Herculean Task of Reaching Two Million Food-Insecure New Yorkers

NYC took advantage of relaxed federal requirements and increased funding, such as the funds from *Nourish New York*, to adapt its service models. In normal times, NYC receives more than \$2.67 billion in SNAP benefits⁷⁹ and provides more than 230 million institutional meals to low-income residents.⁸⁰

Benefits and institutional meals programs are critical to combating food insecurity. So as COVID-19 and the subsequent economic downturn caused food insecurity to double,⁸¹ NYC streamlined application processes for food benefits and doubled down on institutional meal service, purchasing and/or serving hundreds of millions of meals to residents. And like New York State representatives, NYC representatives advocated for ongoing, increased federal support for anti-hunger and nutrition programs.⁸²

To develop a longer-term strategy to meet the food needs of NYC residents during the COVID-19 crisis, the City established a “Food Czar Team” on March 21, 2020, with the Commissioner of the Department of Sanitation, Kathryn Garcia, at the helm.⁸³ On April 10, 2020, the Mayor and City Council authorized Garcia’s team to spend an additional \$25 million,⁸⁴ on top of federal funding for The Emergency Food Assistance

Program (TEFAP) and *Nourish New York*, to cover food and safety costs at food banks and pantries.

On April 15, 2020, Garcia’s team published *Feeding New York: The Plan for Keeping Our City Fed During the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis*.⁸⁵ The \$170 million plan included both short and long-term steps for food banks and pantries, school meals, emergency food home delivery, and senior meals. The plan emphasized the importance of a safe, secure food supply and pledged to connect food business and retailers with personal protective equipment (PPE).⁸⁶ *Feeding New York* also laid out a much-needed plan for residents to access free grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches from schools, groceries from food pantries, and prepared meals for seniors and medically vulnerable individuals through the newly-launched *GetFoodNYC* initiative.⁸⁷

By mid-May, food insecurity among NYC residents had grown from 1.2 million pre-COVID-19 to nearly 2 million people,⁸⁸ highlighting the need for additional City intervention. Mayor de Blasio, along with the Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity (Taskforce), announced a new suite of programs and policies to reduce food insecurity, increase food access, and support food businesses. The Restaurant Revitalization Program was an early, central piece of this plan; the program created an additional avenue for free meals and helped employers cover payroll.

In mid-August 2020, the Taskforce announced new initiatives, enabling vulnerable residents to shop online with independent grocery stores, expanding fruit and vegetable incentives through the City’s *Get the Good Stuff* initiative, increasing support for NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) Food Entrepreneurs, and supporting food pantries in high needs areas.⁸⁹

Recommendations to Strengthen Food Policies and Governance

With increasingly more NYC residents suffering from food insecurity and food businesses struggling, the need for strong, equitable food policies and practices is more pressing than ever. The City must have policies and plans to meet the food needs of its residents. NYC should:

- Strengthen and expand the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy. The Office of Food Policy should exercise the same overarching, inter-agency power that the Food Czar team exercised. With clear authority, adequate funding, and staff who have deep understanding of food programs and policies, NYC could more nimbly respond to future crises.
- Develop a food-specific emergency plan that includes actions not just for natural disasters, but also pandemics and economic downturns.
- Continue to advocate for the federal government to increase food security benefits like SNAP, WIC, and P-EBT.

⁷⁵ N.Y.S. Department of Agriculture and Markets. *New York State Provides Additional Details on \$25 Million in Funding for Food Banks Through Nourish New York Initiative*. May 3, 2020. <https://agriculture.ny.gov/news/new-york-state-provides-additional-details-25-million-funding-food-banks-through-nourish-new>.

⁷⁶ New York State. *Governor Cuomo Announces \$1.5 Million for ‘Feeding New York State’ to Assist Food Insecure New Yorkers and State’s Farmers*. July 17, 2020. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-15-million-feeding-new-york-state-assist-food-insecure-new-yorkers-and>.

⁷⁷ New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. *New York State Provides Additional \$25 Million Funding For Food Banks Through Nourish New York Initiative*. May 3, 2020. <https://agriculture.ny.gov/news/new-york-state-provides-additional-details-25-million-funding-food-banks-through-nourish-new>.

⁷⁸ National Immigration Forum. *Fact Sheet: Immigrants and Public Benefits*. August 21, 2018. [https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-immigrants-and-public-benefits/#:~:text=Undocumented%20immigrants%2C%20including%20DACA%20holders,SSJ\)%2C%20and%20Temporary%20Assistance%20for](https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-immigrants-and-public-benefits/#:~:text=Undocumented%20immigrants%2C%20including%20DACA%20holders,SSJ)%2C%20and%20Temporary%20Assistance%20for).

⁷⁹ N.Y.S. Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. *Monthly Caseload Statistics*. 2019. <https://otda.ny.gov/resources/caseload/>.

⁸⁰ The City of New York Mayor’s Office for Food Policy. *Food Metrics Report*. 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Policy-Report-2019.pdf>.

⁸¹ Mann B. In New York City, 2 Million Residents Face Food Insecurity, Officials Say. *NPR*. May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/21/860312565/in-new-york-city-2-million-residents-face-food-insecurity-officials-say>

⁸² Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University. Zoom Meeting with U.S. Senator Gillibrand, N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation, N.Y.C. Department of Education, and Community Advocates. May 14, 2020.

⁸³ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Mayor de Blasio Expands Senior Leadership Team Combatting COVID-19 Crisis*. March 21, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/174-20/mayor-de-blasio-expands-senior-leadership-team-combating-covid-19-crisis>.

⁸⁴ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Johnson Announce \$25 Million in Emergency Funding for Food Providers*. April 10, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/245-20/mayor-de-blasio-speaker-johnson-25-million-emergency-funding-food-providers>.

⁸⁵ The City of New York, NYC Department of Sanitation. *Feeding New York*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/reports/2020/Feeding-New-York.pdf>.

⁸⁶ The City of New York. *Feeding New York: The Plan for Keeping Our City Fed During the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/reports/2020/Feeding-New-York.pdf>.

⁸⁷ The City of New York, *GetFoodNYC: COVID-19 Emergency Food Distribution*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/contact/services/COVID-19FoodAssistance.shtml>.

⁸⁸ Budryk Z. De Blasio: 2 Million People in NYC Face Food Insecurity Amid Pandemic. *The Hill*. May 21, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/499039-de-blasio-2-million-people-in-new-york-city-face-food-insecurity-amid>.

⁸⁹ The Mayor’s Office of the City of New York. *Mayor de Blasio and Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity Announce New Initiatives to Expand Access to Food Programs in Underserved Communities*. August 14, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/592-20/mayor-de-blasio-taskforce-racial-inclusion-equity-new-initiatives-expand>.

- Upgrade the processes that the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and City agencies use to engage advocates and community members, particularly in low-income communities of color most affected by food inequities. The weekly, and then bi-weekly advocacy calls that the Food Czar team hosted with advocates provided a timely mechanism for feedback and City response.
- Develop an intersectoral alliance of employers, labor unions workers, academics, and other stakeholders to create a workforce development plan for the food sector. Previous municipal efforts have proposed workforce policies for big tech, retail, and healthcare. The plan should consider mechanisms to improve food workers' pay, working conditions, and career advancement.



Food Insecurity: Despite Efforts, NYC Struggled to Respond to Rapidly Rising Food Insecurity

Food Insecurity: Despite Efforts, NYC Struggled to Respond to Rapidly Rising Food Insecurity

From March through August 2020, the number of food-insecure individuals in NYC nearly doubled from 1.2 million to 2 million.⁹⁰ This section describes:

- The steps NYC took to address food insecurity through institutional meal service and emergency food programs,
- Individuals' experiences using the emergency food system, and
- Recommendations to combat food insecurity going forward.

The City Created New Institutional Meal Service Models to Prevent New Yorkers from Going Hungry

Rapidly rising rates of food insecurity required the City to rethink its institutional meal services. City agencies with sophisticated, centralized operations, like the Department

of Education (NYC DOE) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA), adapted existing service models to maximize safe food distribution. The City also launched *GetFoodNYC*, an entirely new program to ensure homebound seniors and medically-vulnerable NYC residents had access to food. Early indicators, such as number of meals served across programs and the number of complaints, both in the press and on weekly advocacy calls that the Food Czar team hosted, suggest that implementing these changes resulted in service that was rocky and at times inconsistent.⁹¹

The NYC DOE was one of the first agencies to radically overhaul its institutional meal service. During the first week of COVID-19 school closures, the NYC DOE provided grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches from each of its 1,100 school buildings.⁹² The following week, March 23, 2020, NYC DOE expanded their services, providing children and adults grab-and-go breakfasts, lunches, and dinners on weekdays outside 439 schools designated as citywide “hubs.” NYC DOE continued to provide hot meals at Regional Enrichment Centers operating childcare for NYC’s essential workers during COVID-19.⁹³ The NYC DOE also launched a partnership with the food delivery service DoorDash to deliver tailored meals to medically vulnerable students.⁹⁴

By June, the NYC DOE was operating approximately 500 sites and serving 550,000 meals a day,⁹⁵ an impressive number, though

still well below the 950,000 typically served during a normal school day.⁹⁶ By August 21, 2020, school sites had served more than 47 million meals.⁹⁷ Our research found that NYC DOE concentrated grab-and-go meal sites in areas that were largely communities of color. NYC DOE also had more meal sites in high-poverty communities than districts in the next three largest cities, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston.⁹⁸

With senior centers closed and a growing number of individuals at risk of infection, many NYC residents who normally rely on institutional meals were at risk of going hungry. Beginning in mid-March, HRA launched additional home-delivery for seniors through *GetFoodNYC*.⁹⁹ The program provided on average 6-meal packs containing three lunches and three breakfasts two times a week. Working together, the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Environmental Protection, Taxi and Limousine Commission, and Department of Sanitation managed and distributed *GetFoodNYC* meals to seniors, as well as medically-vulnerable individuals.¹⁰⁰ By late August, the City provided more than 120 million meals through the initiative.¹⁰¹

GetFoodNYC, an entirely new program utilizing new food providers, came under a high level of scrutiny as the pandemic unfolded.¹⁰² Program participants have criticized the food’s quality, variety, and delivery methods. And many have questioned the decision to give responsibility for the program to an agency less familiar with the senior population, HRA.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the Department for the Aging (DFTA) oversaw the two senior nutrition programs: home-delivered meals (“meals on wheels”) and congregate meals at senior centers and affiliated sites. DFTA home-delivered meal providers have questioned the efficiency of creating a new program. “I don’t understand why the City chose to roll out a whole new program without including providers who have historically been providing food to older adults and communities for decades,” complained one.¹⁰³ Others questioned the decision to require seniors to enroll online. Registration proved difficult for seniors not already enrolled in DFTA meal programs, as many were less comfortable accessing information about and registering for programs online.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁰ Mann B. In NYC, 2 Million Residents Face Food Insecurity, Officials Say. *NPR*. May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/21/860312565/in-new-york-city-2-million-residents-face-food-insecurity-officials-say>.

⁹¹ Kramer M. Demanding Answers: NYC’s COVID-19 Program Accused of Delivering Spoiled Food, Items with No Nutrition Value. *CBS New York*. May 18, 2020. <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2020/05/18/demanding-answers-nycs-covid-19-program-accused-of-delivering-spoiled-food-items-with-no-nutrition-value/>.

⁹² McLoughlin GM, McCarthy JE, McGuirt J, Singleton CR, Dunn CG, Gadhoke P. Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0>.

⁹³ Gonen Y & Chung C. Food Czar to Oversee Meal Delivery for Elderly After Early Stumbles. *The City*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.thecity.nyc/life/2020/4/15/21247114/food-czar-to-oversee-meal-delivery-for-elderly-after-early-stumbles>.

⁹⁴ New York City Office of the Mayor. *Mayor de Blasio Expands Senior Leadership Team Combatting COVID-19 Crisis*. March 21, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/174-20/mayor-de-blasio-expands-senior-leadership-team-combatting-covid-19-crisis>.

⁹⁵ The City of New York. *Mayor de Blasio Announces City Has Distributed 100 Million Meals to New Yorkers Since March, Calls on Federal Government to Increase Funding for Food Assistance*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/533-20/mayor-de-blasio-city-has-distributed-100-million-meals-new-yorkers-since-march-calls>.

⁹⁶ Abraham R. Crisis Led to Shift in Senior Meals That’s Raising Concerns. *City Limits*. June 5, 2020. <https://citylimits.org/2020/06/05/crisis-led-to-shift-in-senior-meals-thats-raising-concerns/>.

⁹⁷ Abraham R. Crisis Led to Shift in Senior Meals That’s Raising Concerns. *City Limits*. June 5, 2020. <https://citylimits.org/2020/06/05/crisis-led-to-shift-in-senior-meals-thats-raising-concerns/>.

⁹⁸ Blau R. City Food Delivery Changes Could Be Leaving Many Seniors Hungry. *The City*. August 25, 2020. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2020/8/25/21401772/city-food-delivery-changes-senior-citizens>.

While the *GetFoodNYC* program mobilized quickly to fill a tremendous gap to ensure NYC residents in need didn't go hungry, further efforts are needed to improve coordination and quality of meals.

The Rapid Rise in Food Insecurity Necessitated an Overhaul of Emergency Feeding Programs

To support food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency food relief programs, the City authorized \$25 million in local tax dollars.¹⁰⁵ Emergency food providers used this funding to purchase food, hire new staff, and cover costs associated with new safety precautions. Garcia's Food Czar Team, with the Department of Social Services, worked with emergency food providers to help them access the funds.¹⁰⁶

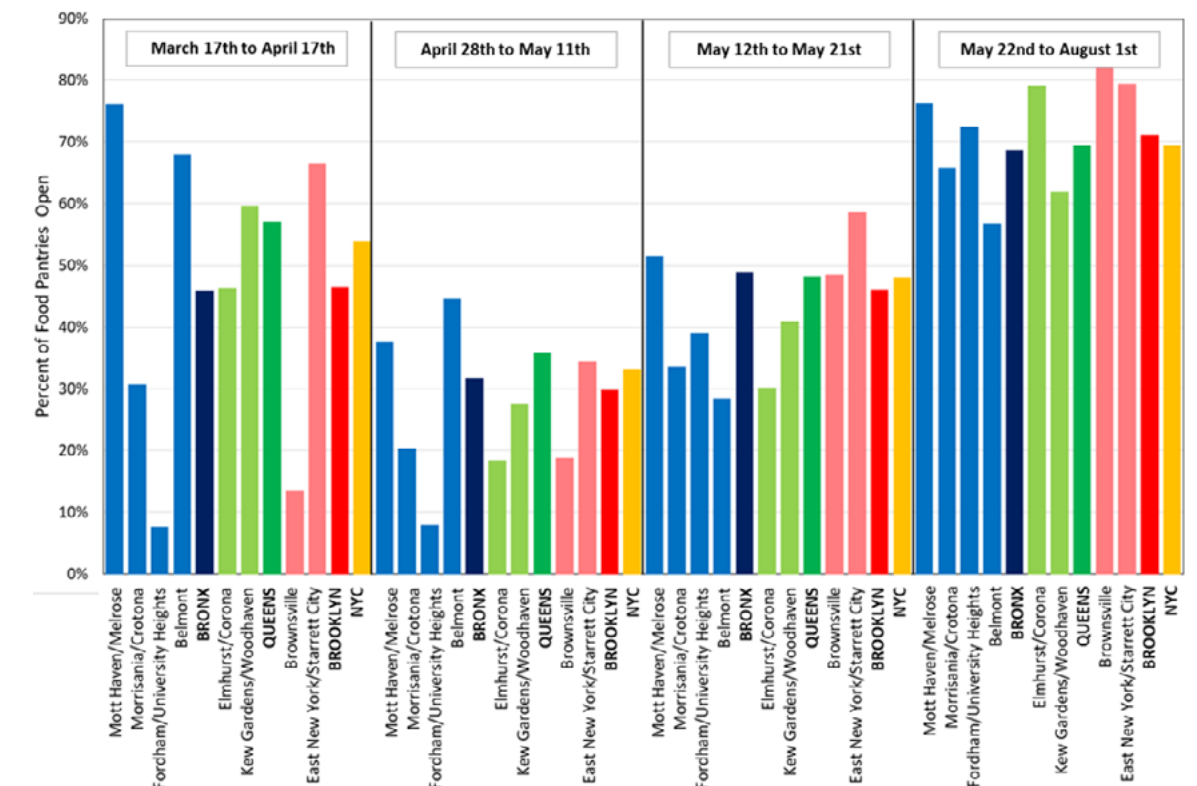
Reports from food banks and pantries suggest that funding may not have been adequate to meet demand. Three out of four food pantries and soup kitchens saw an increase in the total number of visitors compared to last year,¹⁰⁷ including a 71% increase in unemployed workers and a 59% increase in undocumented immigrant clients.¹⁰⁸ And two of the largest emergency feeding programs, City Harvest and Food

Bank For New York City, have reported significant strain on their systems.

City Harvest, the largest food rescue organization in NYC, has distributed 79% more food compared to this time last year.¹⁰⁹ Typically, City Harvest relies solely on donated and rescued food for distribution, but since COVID-19, the organization has spent approximately \$9 million to purchase extra, shelf-stable food to meet increased need.⁹² According to Jerome Nathaniel, Associate Director of Policy and Government Relations at City Harvest, funds from *Nourish NY* and CFAP helped the organization meet the increased demand.¹¹⁰

To respond to changing needs, the Food Bank For NYC implemented new drive-thru pantry pickups, seniors-only distribution hours, and home deliveries with UberEats.¹¹¹ Since March, the organization has distributed nearly 21 million meals to NYC residents in need, an increase of 20% compared to 2019. More than 90% of food pantries and soup kitchens in the organization's network reported an increase in first-time visitors. Though many of Food Bank For New York State's network partners relied on donations from individuals and neighborhood businesses to continue functioning, 53% of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed ran out of food in April.¹¹²

Figure 2: Percentage of Confirmed Open Food Pantries by Neighborhood



Despite Additional Resources, Food Pantries Struggled to Stay Open

Emergency food providers' communication and distribution channels are designed to absorb some degree of shock, but providers could not fill the food insecurity gaps that COVID-19 created. Providers struggled to keep pantries open as many elderly individuals were afraid to volunteer, workers got sick, and food supplies dwindled.

Supply and lack of staff may be reasons for food pantry and soup kitchen closures. At the beginning of the pandemic, a majority of food pantries were not open. Between April

and mid-May 2020, we could only confirm 20 to 35% of food pantries city-wide were open. Neighborhoods hardest hit by the COVID-19 virus had access to fewer food pantries and soup kitchens.¹¹³ For example, Morrisania and Brownsville, communities with disproportionately high infection rates, had very low percentages of food pantries that remained open (8% and 12%, respectively).¹¹⁴

As time passed, more pantries began to re-open. From May 22 through August 1, 2020, the percentage of food pantries that we confirmed to be open steadily increased from 63 to 72%, rates still lower than prior to the pandemic.¹¹⁵ But, the limited number of days and hours that pantries were open—in many

¹⁰⁵ The City of New York. *Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Johnson Announce \$25 Million in Emergency Funding for Food Providers*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/245-20/mayor-de-blasio-speaker-johnson-25-million-emergency-funding-food-providers>.

¹⁰⁶ McLoughlin GM, McCarthy JE, McGuirt J, Singleton CR, Dunn CG, Gadhoke P. *Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0>.

¹⁰⁷ Food Bank For New York City. *New Yorkers Don't Live Single-Issue Lives: The Intersections of Hunger*. 2020. https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m-4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Intersections-of-Hunger_NYC-Hunger-Conference-Report_02.13.20.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Food Bank for New York City. *Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic*. 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/fighting-more-than-covid-19/>.

¹⁰⁹ City Harvest. *Always Here for Our City: Six Months of Feeding New Yorkers During a Pandemic*. 2020.

¹¹⁰ Nathaniel J. Email communication. City Harvest. September 23, 2020.

¹¹¹ Food Bank for New York City. *Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic*. 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/fighting-more-than-covid-19/>.

¹¹² Food Bank for New York City. *Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic*. 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/fighting-more-than-covid-19/>.

¹¹³ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Neighborhood Food Resource Guide AirTable Database. August 28, 2020.

¹¹⁵ Gilman A. 'I Can't Believe This is America.' Confronted With Unprecedented Need, New York Food Pantries Try to Fill in the Gaps. *MarketWatch*. August 6, 2020. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/i-cant-believe-this-is-america-confronted-with-unprecedented-need-new-york-food-pantries-try-to-fill-in-the-gaps-2020-08-06>.

instances only once a week or once a month—may still have limited community members’ access to food. Data collected by our research indicated that 14% of food pantries and soup kitchens that were open in August 2020 were only open once or twice a month, on rotating schedules such as “every other Sunday” or the “first and third Wednesday of the month.”¹¹⁶ Figure 2 (page 11) shows the percentage of open food pantries by neighborhood, borough, and NYC overall during the periods described above.

Community Members Played a Crucial Role, Improving Neighborhood Food Access

Community-based organizations, in addition to established emergency feeding providers, responded swiftly to the increased demand for food. A survey of 42 food and nutrition education organizations across the City found that these groups continued to support the most vulnerable communities in NYC, providing meals, delivering groceries, communicating about food assistance, and offering virtual education to support healthy diets.¹¹⁷ Organizations incurred new costs, paying for additional food, packaging materials, and transportation. Many hired additional staff to replace existing staff as they got sick or were unable to work. Some paid overtime for frontline, IT, and program staff.

Helping community members in need has proven costly, with some groups reporting future losses of more than one million dollars. But, as Nando Rodriguez, a coordinator for

Brotherhood/Sister Sol explained, “That is a necessity for a pandemic. It’s healthy, fresh, local food that they’re getting.”¹¹⁸ Before the pandemic, Brotherhood/Sister Sol provided meals for youth who participated in their after-school programs and operated a food pantry once a month. When the pandemic hit, the West Harlem nonprofit doubled the pantry’s hours and reach, offering students bags of healthy groceries to take home.

Another community-based organization, the Green Bronx Machine, quickly mobilized to deliver food to those in need in their South Bronx community. The founders, Lizette and Stephen Ritz, purchased fruits and vegetables from the Hunts Point Produce Market each week. They delivered food boxes to their students in the Bronx, as well as to immunocompromised Memorial Sloan Kettering patients who were unable to safely leave their homes.¹¹⁹

Mutual-aid networks were another key community resource. These groups included parents, students, immigrants, caregivers, care workers, organizers, advocates, and people who lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19 and found themselves with more time on their hands. Individuals in these networks mobilized across NYC, connecting community members to resources and ensuring that the hardest-hit communities benefited from mutual aid and advocacy. Some helped organize childcare for essential workers, or helped make micropayments to out-of-work freelancers, while others, such as Bed-Stuy Strong and Invisible Hands,

provided free grocery delivery to the elderly, ill, or immunocompromised.^{120,121}

And individual community members, in addition to these groups, launched pop-up pantries and community fridges.¹²² Individual initiatives could not meet the overwhelming need, but did promote a sense of community when so many were struggling.

Accessing Emergency Food Resources Was Challenging for NYC Residents

To assess the individual and community-level responses to COVID-19, we conducted interviews with individuals from under-resourced communities of color in July and August of 2020. Participants provided information on their experiences with food security and food resources (e.g., delivery services, pantries) during the months in lockdown.¹²³

Many interviewed described their fear of catching the virus outside their homes, especially if they or a household member had any one of a number of comorbid medical conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, cancer, or HIV. To reduce their risk, the majority of those interviewed shopped for food less frequently than prior

to the pandemic, exacerbating the existing challenges to food access.¹²⁴

Traveling to emergency food programs with children in tow created additional stresses and barriers. One mother explained, “At the beginning, when I did not know about this service that they deliver food to the house, I was going to the food pantry, but they always told me, ‘No children, you can’t bring children, just parents can come.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, but I don’t have anyone to leave them with.’”¹²⁵

For another mother, standing on line for long stretches of time with young children proved particularly difficult.¹²⁶ The problem of long lines was compounded by interruptions to the food supply chain.¹²⁷ Another contributing factor to long lines and wait times was the relatively small number of pantries open compared to before the pandemic.

Many Individuals Struggled to Find Information About Available Food Resources

Access to information about food resources was a commonly cited problem. Many local anti-hunger initiatives struggled to promote their services to people who did not have mailing addresses, emails, or cell phones. Consequently, some interviewees did not know about City and community-based anti-hunger initiatives, and others

¹²⁰ Rose, J. Mutual Aid Networks Are Distributing Food With Tech That Works For Everyone. *VICE*. April 28, 2020. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/g5xq9/mutual-aid-networks-are-distributing-food-with-tech-that-works-for-everyone

¹²¹ Tolentino, J. What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic. *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/what-mutual-aid-can-do-during-a-pandemic>

¹²² Colyar B. The Secondhand Refrigerators Feeding New Yorkers. *The Cut*. July 7, 2020. <https://www.thecut.com/2020/07/new-york-community-fridges.html>.

¹²³ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹²⁴ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹²⁵ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹²⁶ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹²⁷ Dickinson M. Food frights: COVID-19 and the Specter of Hunger. *Agriculture and Human Values*. 2020;37:589-590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10063-3>

¹¹⁶ Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Neighborhood Food Resource Guide AirTable Database. August 28, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University. *The Impact of COVID-19 on Food and Nutrition Education Organizations*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/tisch/food-ed-hub/news/data-brief-covid19-survey-results/>.

¹¹⁸ Veiga C. Food Education Organizations Ramp up Efforts to Feed NYC Students, Even While Facing Their Own Hardships. *Chalkbeat*. April 15, 2020. <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/15/21225518/food-education-organizations-ramp-up-efforts-to-feed-nyc-students-even-while-facing-their-own-hardsh>.

¹¹⁹ Nielsen A, Platkin C, and Cather A. *Changemaker: A Modern Day Hero Changing One Life at a Time*. Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center. August 2020. <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/changemaker-a-modern-day-hero-changing-one-life-at-a-time/>.

discovered programs in their communities by happenstance. As one interviewee explained, “Sometimes you walk down the street and you see a line of people at a pantry, but you don’t know, what are the qualifications? Do I stand in line for two hours to get an answer or you know, how do y’all find out to get the services?”¹²⁸

City leaders, community-based organizations, and other community members acknowledged that at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a lack of centralized information about food resources. A school social worker explained, “I have been in contact with many families mostly in the Bronx that are running into issues regarding food supply. I have had a difficult time providing adequate resources for these families...Is there a way to link up with a resource in the Bronx to directly connect these families to a food source? Many of these students have sensory issues that make eating more difficult.”¹²⁹

NYC agencies worked to provide information on food pantries and soup kitchens, but this information was not always complete or tailored to meet the needs of seniors to understand. The Hunter College NYC FPC, in partnership with NYC agencies and community-based organizations, developed [CORONAVIRUS NYC NEIGHBORHOOD FOOD RESOURCE GUIDES](#) for each of the City’s 59 community districts to address these concerns. Each guide includes information specific to the district, including the location and hours of food pantries, soup kitchens, student meals, senior meals, delivery services, and food stores that offer delivery. Additionally the guides list social services

such as immigrant, housing, and disability services. The Hunter College NYC FPC worked with Share Meals to also create an online database.^{130,131}

Recommendations to Reduce Food Insecurity

In the long run, ending food insecurity in NYC, an achievable goal in the wealthiest city in the world, will require taking on persistent poverty and income inequality. In the current period, more short-term policies are needed to protect the City’s most vulnerable populations from food insecurity. NYC should:

- For users, create and maintain a public dataset of all food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency food resources that includes up-to-date information on openings, closings, and hours of operation. The City should provide simple technologies for emergency food providers to easily update their status.
- With emergency food providers, create a live database of food pantry inventory to make sure that food banks, community organizations, and the City are supplementing low inventory and meeting high demand.
- Recruit and train a volunteer workforce to fill staffing gaps in the emergency food network and other critical food programs.

Food Retail and Restaurants: NYC Residents’ Food Purchasing Patterns Changed During the COVID-19 Crisis

¹²⁸ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹²⁹ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹³⁰ Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center. *Coronavirus NYC Neighborhood Food Resource Guides*. 2020. <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/coronavirus-nyc-food-reports/>.

¹³¹ To ensure that the guides contained the most up-to-date information, more than 125 volunteers make continuous, weekly calls to food pantries, soup kitchens, neighborhood organizations, supermarkets, bodegas, and other retail food outlets. More than 30,000 volunteer call attempts were made between early April and August 2020 to update the resource information.

Food Retail and Restaurants: NYC Residents' Food Purchasing Patterns Changed During the COVID-19 Crisis

Just as the pandemic disrupted the city's food security services, it transformed, at least temporarily, food retail and restaurant environments. The following section:

- Illustrates changes to individuals' purchasing patterns in food stores, including an increase in sales at direct markets,
- Describes how inequities in retail environments were exacerbated,
- Details the difficulties restaurants faced, and
- Recommends policies to promote a strong regional food system.

Changes to the Food Retail Environments Impacted How, Where, and When New Yorkers Bought Food

The pandemic and its economic consequences precipitated a cascade of changes in how, where, and when NYC residents purchase food.¹³² New York State's Stay-at-Home Order closed daycares,

schools, worksites, and restaurants—places where Americans previously spent 50% of their food budget, as a result, these closures encouraged an increase in food retail purchases.

To support grocery stores and protect consumers, the City asked food retailers to enforce a number of COVID-19-related precautions, requiring customers to wear a mask to enter, offering hours for seniors and other vulnerable individuals to shop, and updating systems to encourage social distancing. NYC also pledged to connect large grocery stores with personal protective equipment (PPE) manufacturers, provide child care for food retail workers, and help grocery stores recruit experienced staff.¹³³

Steps the City Took to Strengthen the Food Retail Supply Chain

To ensure food would continue to flow into grocery stores, bodegas, farmers' markets and restaurants, the City authorized \$50 million to shore up the supply chain. For example, the City invested in infrastructure to accommodate long-haul truckers, who deliver approximately 90% of the City's food supply. The City built new rest areas near food distribution centers in Staten Island to the South and Hunts Point to the North, where 13% of food enters the City.¹³⁴

More than 70% of NYC residents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic changed where and how they purchase food. According to a poll of 1,000 NYC households, 70% also reported spending more money weekly on

food since the beginning of the pandemic.¹³⁵ But more money did not necessarily equate to more trips to the store; nearly 65% of NYC residents reported shopping for food less frequently. Respondents shopped at different stores and more stores than before the pandemic. Most respondents reported shopping at their preferred, regular retailers (68%), but almost a third (29%) shopped at stores they had not previously frequented before the pandemic.¹³⁶

Consumers, many of whom previously had not shopped online, purchased groceries online. According to Pew Charitable Trusts, a third of adults shopped online at least once a month versus 27% in 2019, and 21% of adults said they would rather use a food delivery service than go to a grocery store.¹³⁷

At the start of the pandemic, another survey of 300 New York residents tracked the availability of food at local food retail markets. Many noted a low availability of supermarket staples and an inability to purchase everything on their shopping list. One shopper noted, "While I was able to largely fill my shopping list, there were significantly fewer product choices than before the pandemic. Often what's left are the most expensive options of a type of product. So on top of groceries being more expensive in general...many lower priced items are out of stock."¹³⁸

Many individuals waited in line for a long time, only to discover that many staple items, such as rice and milk, were sold out. Another respondent explained, "I waited more than an hour to get into the store. The shopping experience was extremely stressful."¹³⁹

Access may have been worse for consumers shopping at smaller grocery stores and bodegas. Many NYC residents observed that these stores charged more for their products and/or offered more packaged and processed food choices rather than fresh and perishable items.¹⁴⁰

Pre-Pandemic Inequities Food Purchasing and Consumption Patterns Were Exacerbated, Compromising Vulnerable Shoppers

COVID-19 related changes to NYC residents' food purchasing and consumption patterns often varied by race, income status, and age, suggesting inequities. One study of NYC residents showed that a significantly larger percentage of Latinx, Black, and Asian respondents reported eating more packaged foods than White and other respondents. Respondents with household incomes less than \$50,000 also reported eating more

¹³⁵ CUNY School of Public Health. *CUNY SPH COVID-19 Survey – Week 12 – Part 1: Food insecurity*. 2020. <https://sph.cuny.edu/research/COVID-19-tracking-survey/week-12/>.

¹³⁶ CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. *Supermarket Availability in the Time of COVID-19: Results From Three Rounds of Surveys of New York Residents Shopping for Groceries During the COVID-19 Crisis*. 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/7/29/supermarket-availability-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-results-from-three-rounds-of-surveys-of-new-york-residents-shopping-for-groceries-during-the-COVID-19-crisis>.

¹³⁷ Pew Research Center. *Most Americans Say Coronavirus Outbreak Has Impacted Their Lives*. 2020. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/03/30/most-americans-say-coronavirus-outbreak-has-impacted-their-lives/>.

¹³⁸ CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. *Supermarket Availability in the Time of COVID-19: Results From Three Rounds of Surveys of New York Residents Shopping for Groceries During the COVID-19 Crisis*. 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/7/29/supermarket-availability-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-results-from-three-rounds-of-surveys-of-new-york-residents-shopping-for-groceries-during-the-COVID-19-crisis>.

¹³⁹ CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. *Supermarket Availability in the Time of COVID-19: Results From Three Rounds of Surveys of New York Residents Shopping for Groceries During the COVID-19 Crisis*. 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/7/29/supermarket-availability-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-results-from-three-rounds-of-surveys-of-new-york-residents-shopping-for-groceries-during-the-COVID-19-crisis>.

¹⁴⁰ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

¹³² Severson K. 7 Ways the Pandemic Has Changed How We Shop for Food. *The New York Times*. September 8, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/dining/grocery-shopping-coronavirus.html?searchResultPosition=1&utm_source=September+9%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Dec.+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email.

¹³³ Warekar T. What to Know About NYC's \$170M Grocery and Food Plan During the Coronavirus Crisis. *NY Eater*. April 15, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/15/21222448/nyc-food-plan-coronavirus-19-delivery-grocery-restaurants>.

¹³⁴ Warekar T. What to Know About NYC's \$170M Grocery and Food Plan During the Coronavirus Crisis. *NY Eater*. April 15, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/15/21222448/nyc-food-plan-coronavirus-19-delivery-grocery-restaurants>.

packaged foods compared to more affluent households.¹⁴¹

In the previously mentioned survey of 300 plus NYC residents, impressions of store supplies in low-income and high-income communities differed.¹⁴² Shoppers from low-income neighborhoods reported that essential items were available less often than did shoppers from higher income neighborhoods,¹⁴³ suggesting that inequities in food retail outlets in low- and high-income neighborhoods, prevalent prior to the pandemic, continue to compromise low-income communities' ability to acquire food.

Though available data are scarce, it is plausible that SNAP users, specifically, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 changes to food retail. Twenty-nine percent of NYC residents report shopping at new and different retailers during the pandemic to find the goods they needed. For SNAP recipients, finding a retailer can be difficult as only 61% of NYC retailers accept EBT.^{144,145} Because many markets experienced limited access to staple products, SNAP users probably have had less opportunity, as well

as more stress, than other consumers to find needed goods at alternative markets.

New York was the first state to participate in SNAP's online shopping pilot prior to COVID-19 and should have been well-positioned for an influx in online grocery shopping at the start of the pandemic.¹⁴⁶ But, for low-income shoppers using SNAP, both perceived and actual higher online prices, delivery fees, and technological barriers may inhibit shopping online.¹⁴⁷ SNAP does not cover delivery fees, potentially putting online grocery shopping out of reach.¹⁴⁸ New users, many of whom are seniors, face technological barriers, and prefer shopping in person.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, by September 2020, Amazon, ShopRite, and Walmart were the only New York food retailers accepting SNAP online, and Walmart no longer delivers groceries in NYC.¹⁵⁰

Two other groups that may have been disproportionately affected by pandemic changes to retail operations are senior citizens and immunocompromised NYC residents. Limited in their ability to physically travel to stores or to wait in line for risk of exposure,

these individuals have become reliant on grocery delivery services and support from community members to procure food.¹⁵¹ With the increased demand for online groceries, retailers have struggled to keep up both with the demand for delivery slots and technological infrastructure needed to support the increase.^{152,153,154}

Sales at Direct Markets Grew

Sales at NYC farmers' markets and other informal food markets have grown significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵⁵ Key information about this sector comes from GrowNYC, an organization that operates more than 50 Greenmarket farmers' markets offering regionally-sourced produce and artisanal food products across the five boroughs. The organization has several youth-run Farmstands, a Fresh Food Box distribution program, and GrowNYC Wholesale. GrowNYC accepts SNAP and other nutrition benefits.

After implementing safety and social distancing protocols in March 2020, the organization now operates 74 combined weekly sites. Its wholesale arm distributed more than 1.8 million pounds of food between mid-March 2020 and the end of July 2020—more than the total amount distributed the entire previous fiscal year.¹⁵⁶ GrowNYC credits an emergency food box contract with NYC for about 50% of this increase. Through

the contract they distributed about 88,000 pounds of food per week to community organizations providing emergency food.

The other 50% of GrowNYC's growth came from sales from internal GrowNYC programs such as Farmstand and Fresh Food Box and from nonprofit partners.¹⁵⁷ Though the organization experienced decreased sales to restaurants and institutions over the same period, sales to non-profit partners operating their own initiatives increased by nearly 70%.

Despite GrowNYC suspending six of its Greenmarket farmers' markets in lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn because of reduced foot traffic, the Greenmarkets serving residential areas experienced increased sales. For residential Greenmarkets, SNAP sales between March and June 2020 were up 75% compared to the same period for 2019, though customer volume was slightly down. The average transaction for SNAP purchases increased significantly, probably because of increased SNAP benefits. Fresh Food Box participation also increased significantly. Between March 15 and June 30, 2020, participation grew by 65%. Between March 15 and June 30, 2020, participation grew by 65%.

¹⁴¹ CUNY School of Public Health. *CUNY SPH COVID-19 Survey – Week 10*. 2020. <https://sph.cuny.edu/research/COVID-19-tracking-survey/week-10/>.

¹⁴² CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. *Supermarket Availability in the Time of COVID-19: Results From Three Rounds of Surveys of New York Residents Shopping for Groceries During the COVID-19 Crisis*. 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/7/29/supermarket-availability-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-results-from-three-rounds-of-surveys-of-new-york-residents-shopping-for-groceries-during-the-COVID-19-crisis>.

¹⁴³ CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. *Supermarket Availability in the Time of COVID-19: Results From Three Rounds of Surveys of New York Residents Shopping for Groceries During the COVID-19 Crisis*. 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/7/29/supermarket-availability-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-results-from-three-rounds-of-surveys-of-new-york-residents-shopping-for-groceries-during-the-COVID-19-crisis>.

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¹⁴⁵ USDA. *SNAP Store Locations*. 2020. <https://usda-fns.hub.arcgis.com/datasets/USDA-FNS::snap-store-locations/data?geometry=-75.618%2C40.323%2C-72.221%2C41.052&orderBy=State>.

¹⁴⁶ USDA. *FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot*. 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot>.

¹⁴⁷ Cohen N, Fraser KT, Arnow C, et al. Online Grocery Shopping by NYC Public Housing Residents Using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Benefits: A Service Ecosystems Perspective. *MDPI*. 2020; 12:4694. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/11/4694>.

¹⁴⁸ Janzer C. Amid COVID-19, SNAP Rolls Out Online Ordering. *Next City*. May 21, 2020. <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/amid-covid-19-snap-rolls-out-online-ordering>.

¹⁴⁹ Cohen N, Fraser KT, Arnow C, et al. Online Grocery Shopping by NYC Public Housing Residents Using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Benefits: A Service Ecosystems Perspective. *MDPI*. 2020; 12:4694. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/11/4694>.

¹⁵⁰ NYC Human Resources Administration. *Shop for Groceries Online with Your SNAP Benefits*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/snap-online-shopping.page>.

¹⁵¹ De Blasio B. Mayor De Blasio And Taskforce on Racial Inclusion And Equity Announce New Initiatives. *Canarsie Courier*. August 16, 2020. <https://canarsiecourier.com/mayor-de-blasio-and-taskforce-on-racial-inclusion-and-equity-announce-new-i-p5945-255.htm>.

¹⁵² Lynch J. Your Coronavirus Buying Habits Are Ruining the Grocery Supply Chain. *Delish*. April 22, 2020. <https://www.delish.com/food/a3222325/grocery-delivery-slots-coronavirus/>.

¹⁵³ Saulsbery G. Grocery delivery services experience delays amid COVID-19. *NJBIZ*. March 17, 2020. <https://njbiz.com/grocery-delivery-services-experiencing-delays-amid-COVID-19/>.

¹⁵⁴ Bhattarai A. Grocery Delivery Was Supposed to be the Ultimate Pandemic Lifeline. But It's Falling Short. *The Washington Post*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/15/grocery-delivery-coronavirus/>.

¹⁵⁵ Branchflower O, Huber C. Email communication. GrowNYC. August 12, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Branchflower O, Huber C. Email communication. GrowNYC. August 12, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Branchflower O, Huber C. Email communication. GrowNYC. August 12, 2020.

Restaurants Suffered, Especially Independent Restaurants and Women- and Minority-Owned Restaurants

NYC restaurants and bars closed in mid-March, though many continued to offer take-out and delivery.¹⁵⁸ When offices closed and tourism decreased, lunch business declined steadily in neighborhoods which previously thrived.¹⁵⁹ NYC restaurant spending dropped by more than 90% in late March, compared to the previous year. Experts predict that the decrease in restaurant spending will cost the City more than \$1 billion in lost sales tax revenue.¹⁶⁰

As many as 1,000 NYC restaurants closed permanently, many of them small, independent businesses.¹⁶¹ Restaurants and other food businesses run by women,

immigrants, and minorities fared the worst.^{162,163,164} Meanwhile, some larger enterprises such as chain restaurants have had the financial capital to withstand COVID-19-related challenges.¹⁶⁵ At present, the full impact of COVID-19 on the NYC restaurant industry is difficult to quantify and unlikely to be fully understood for months to come.¹⁶⁶

Outdoor dining returned to NYC in the second phase of reopening, on June 22, 2020.¹⁶⁷ The NYC restaurant industry benefited from local legislation that allowed them to use street and sidewalk space for food service. Restaurants have reported that reservations for outdoor slots filled quickly.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, relaxed restrictions from the NYS Liquor Authority on take-out alcoholic beverages have increased sales of to-go cocktails, currently an important income stream

for many restaurants.¹⁶⁹ But, there have been reports of a number of license suspensions throughout New York City and State for restaurants not adequately enforcing social distancing during outdoor dining.¹⁷⁰

Recommendations to Support Food Retail and Restaurants

While the City's short-term efforts prevented catastrophic supply chain disruptions in the chaotic early days of the pandemic,¹⁷¹ the City needs long-term solutions to prevent further disruptions. Significant evidence exists on the potential benefits of a regional, sustainably-oriented food system. Carefully planned regional supply chains for retail and restaurants could help alleviate the impact of future hardships.^{172,173} Taking a more regional approach for our food system will ensure that NYC will not again face the problems the pandemic presented.¹⁷⁴

NYC should:

- Continue to invest in technological solutions that enable more consumers to purchase groceries online.
- Provide technical assistance to expand the number of food retailers who accept EBT, both in-store and online.
- Provide incentives for food retail businesses to use local suppliers and purchase local foods.
- Strengthen regional supply chains and increase direct market access across the region.
- Expand economic stimulus support, focusing on small and independent food businesses, with particular focus on those that women, people of color, and immigrants own and operate.

¹⁵⁸ Adams E. NYC Restaurant Spending Dropped by More Than 90 Percent In Late March. *New York Eater*. April 16, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/16/21223718/nyc-restaurant-spending-declines-coronavirus>.

¹⁵⁹ Haag M & McGeehan P. Retail Chains Abandon Manhattan: 'It's Unsustainable'. *The New York Times*. August 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/11/nyregion/nyc-economy-chain-stores.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Adams E. NYC Restaurant Spending Dropped by More Than 90 Percent In Late March. *New York Eater*. April 16, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/16/21223718/nyc-restaurant-spending-declines-coronavirus>.

¹⁶¹ Fortney L. No One Knows How Many Restaurants Have Closed in New York City. *New York Eater*. August 13, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/8/12/21336334/nyc-closings-lookback-coronavirus-pandemic-2020>.

¹⁶² Haag M. One-Third of New York's Small Businesses May Be Gone Forever. *New York Times*. August 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/nyregion/nyc-small-businesses-closing-coronavirus.html>.

¹⁶³ Knowles H, Bellware K. Fear Sent Her Chinatown Restaurant Spiraling. The Challenges to Reopening Feel 'Just Impossible.' *The Washington Post*. May 16, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/16/asian-american-business-coronavirus/>.

¹⁶⁴ Lent M. Black Business Owners Hang on Through Covid Crisis as Black Lives Matter Movement Surges. *Gotham Gazette*. July 13, 2020. <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/9583-black-business-owners-COVID-19-black-lives-matter-new-york-city-coronavirus>.

¹⁶⁵ Raymond A. All the Household-Name Companies That Have Filed for Bankruptcy Due to Coronavirus. *New York Magazine*. August 3, 2020. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/08/major-companies-filing-for-bankruptcy-due-to-coronavirus.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Otterman S. Outdoor Dining Is a Hit, but Restaurants Face 'Apocalyptic' Times. *New York Times*. August 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/23/nyregion/outdoor-dining-new-york.html>.

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¹⁷⁰ Kuperstein A. New York Steps Up Crackdown on Restaurants, Bars Over Social Distancing. *NBC New York*. July 27, 2020. <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/new-york-steps-up-crackdown-on-restaurants-bars-over-social-distancing/2536569/>.

¹⁷¹ Warekar T. What to Know About NYC's \$170M Grocery and Food Plan During the Coronavirus Crisis. *NY Eater*. April 15, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/15/21222448/nyc-food-plan-coronavirus-19-delivery-grocery-restaurants>.

¹⁷² Frontiers. *COVID-19: Food System Frailties and Opportunities*. 2020. <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/14421/COVID-19-food-system-frailties-and-opportunities>.

¹⁷³ Bello W. The Corporate Food System Is Making the Coronavirus Crisis Worse. *Common Dreams*. April 26, 2020. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/04/26/corporate-food-system-making-coronavirus-crisis-worse>.

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Diet Quality: COVID-19 Influenced the Healthfulness and Affordability of New Yorkers' Diets

Diet Quality: COVID-19 Influenced the Healthfulness and Affordability of New Yorkers' Diets

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of healthy eating.¹⁷⁵ This section:

- Describes how changes in the food environment influenced dietary choices during COVID-19,
- Explains how programs to support healthy eating shifted online if possible,
- Calls for more information on the nutritional quality of food provided through institutional meals and emergency food providers, and
- Recommends policies to improve diet quality.

The Food Environment Influences Our Health

The COVID-19 crisis has made increasingly clear how dangerous diet-related diseases can be.¹⁷⁶ A healthy diet can support immune system responses and reduce disease susceptibility.¹⁷⁷ Conversely, diet related diseases—obesity, diabetes, and hypertension—make NYC residents more vulnerable to COVID-19.¹⁷⁸ With rates of adult obesity, diabetes, and hypertension topping 25%, 10%, and 29% respectively,^{179,180,181} a considerable number of NYC residents are at high risk for hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Disparities in nutrition typically correlate closely with racial and ethnic disparities, making Black and Latinx residents even more susceptible to the virus.¹⁸²

Disproportionate rates of poverty and food insecurity influence the prevalence of diet-related disease.¹⁸³ The food environment is another key reason that diets do not match dietary recommendations.¹⁸⁴ Unhealthy food marketing, the glut of highly-processed products in stores, and

¹⁷⁵ Mozaffarian D, Glickman D, Meydani SN. How Your Diet Can Help Flatten the Curve. *CNN*. March 27, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/27/opinions/healthy-diet-immune-system-covid-19-mozaffarian-glickman-nikbin-meydani/index.html>.

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Preliminary Estimates of the Prevalence of Selected Underlying Health Conditions Among Patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019. *MMWR Weekly*. 2020;69(13):382–386. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6913e2.htm>.

¹⁷⁷ Naja F, Hamadeh R. Nutrition Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Multi-Level Framework for Action. *European Journal on Clinical Nutrition*. 2020;74:1117–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41430-020-0634-3>.

¹⁷⁸ N.Y.S. Department of Health. *COVID-19 Tracker: Fatalities*. 2020. <https://covid19tracker.health.ny.gov/views/NYS-COVID19-Tracker/NYSDOHCOVID-19Tracker-Fatalities?%3Aembed=yes&%3Atoolbar=no&%3Atabs=n#/views/NYS%2dCOVID19%2dTracker/NYS-DOHCOVID%2d19Tracker%2dMap?%253Aembed=yes&%253Atoolbar=no>.

¹⁷⁹ N.Y.C. Environment & Health Data Portal. *Adult Obesity*. 2017. <http://a816-dohbesp.nyc.gov/IndicatorPublic/VisualizationData.aspx?id=2063,4466a0,113,Summarize>.

¹⁸⁰ N.Y.C. Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *EpiData Brief: Diabetes in New York City*. April 2013;No. 26. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief26.pdf>.

¹⁸¹ N.Y.C. Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *EpiData Brief: Hypertension in New York City*. December 2016;No. 82. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief82.pdf>.

¹⁸² Belanger MJ et al. Covid-19 and Disparities in Nutrition and Obesity. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2020; 383:e69.

¹⁸³ Food Research & Action Center. *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*. December 2017. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ Herforth A, Ahmed S. The Food Environment, Its Effects on Dietary Consumption, and Potential for Measurement Within Agriculture-Nutrition Interventions. *Food Security*. 2015;7:505–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-015-0455-8>.

lack of neighborhood access to healthy options influence individuals' purchases, and ultimately, consumption. Print, radio, TV, and digital environments are cluttered with advertisements for unhealthy food and beverages,¹⁸⁵ many of them targeting Black and Latinx youth.¹⁸⁶

With so many consumers stuck at home, food and beverage manufacturers have accelerated advertising for at-home snacks, turning the global crisis into an opportunity to peddle additional products to an anxious, captive audience.¹⁸⁷ Their marketing strategies have worked; sales of highly processed products like chips and candy have increased since March.¹⁸⁸ As the CEO of Coca-Cola recently explained, in "every previous crisis, military, economic or pandemic, in the last 134 years, the Coke Company has come out stronger."¹⁸⁹

Programs to Support Healthy Eating Adapted and Moved Online, Yet Data on Impacts on Diet Quality Are Limited

To support healthy eating through retail, institutional meals, and the emergency

food system, NYC rapidly adapted existing programs and launched new initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. News clips, interviews, and feedback on weekly advocacy calls that the City hosted suggest that across initiatives, food quality was not as important as food access. Very little public information is available on the foods that the City purchased or served. More research is needed to know if the changes the City made supported healthy eating.

More information is also needed to understand if efforts the City has launched to support healthy retail are working. In August, the Taskforce announced plans to expand *Get the Good Stuff*,¹⁹⁰ a program that provides an additional dollar for every dollar an individual spends on fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruit, vegetables, and beans.¹⁹¹ The City launched the program in three supermarkets in 2019,¹⁹² and will now expand to an additional five stores in the communities hit hardest by COVID-19. Research demonstrates that healthy food pricing incentives like *Get the Good Stuff* effectively increase fruit and vegetable consumption and purchases.¹⁹³

At the same time, the City announced a pilot program to expand online grocery shopping in 35 independent supermarkets. Online grocery shopping has the potential to increase healthy food access and consumption.¹⁹⁴ It can reduce impulse purchases and lower barriers for people with limited mobility or stores in their communities. But, as food marketing shifts online, digital grocery platforms could also reinforce unhealthy behaviors and biases. The City must evaluate online grocery purchase patterns in the pilot and *Get the Good Stuff* program's impact on diet quality as the pandemic continues.

Like the City, the State also adapted programs to support healthy purchases. During the pandemic, NYS Department of Health (NYS DOH) applied for USDA waivers to provide SNAP and WIC services remotely, online and via phone.¹⁹⁵ When COVID-19 restrictions disrupted SNAP-Ed programming, a healthy eating program which had relied on face-to-face interactions, NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) also moved services online. Evaluations of changes to SNAP, WIC, and SNAP-Ed are needed to understand how these changes influenced diet quality.

Shifts in Service Models for Institutional Meals Contributed to Uneven Access to Nutrition

Institutional meals switched to grab-and-go and delivery models during the initial weeks of the pandemic. Comparing the changes in school meals programs and *GetFoodNYC*, the main meal programs that the City operated

during the pandemic can highlight which program features supported healthy diets.

The NYC DOE relied on the expertise of its centralized office, large workforce, and existing infrastructure. Though NYC DOE could have applied for a nutrition waiver from the USDA, the agency continued serving meals that met federal and NYC food standards. To accommodate individuals' dietary restrictions, NYC DOE continued to serve halal, kosher, and vegetarian meals. NYC DOE's efforts to provide culturally-responsive options reflect the district's understanding that diets of good quality provide the right amount of nourishing food, support long-term health, and meet consumers' cultural preferences.

Despite NYC DOE's herculean efforts, the agency reached only a fraction of the students it normally does. Participation rates were, at best, only 57% of normal participation.¹⁹⁶ Serving the same meals repeatedly, particularly to individuals with dietary restrictions, and the lack of hot meals may have influenced participation rates. Other obstacles include inadequate federal funding to cover changes in operation, limited space to prepare and package grab-and-go meals, reduced workforce during summer months, and food safety concerns.¹⁹⁷

Decreased participation rates can result in increased rates of diet-related diseases. Regular consumption of school meals can improve dietary intake, as students who eat school meals every day consume more fruits, vegetables, fiber, and whole grains than those

¹⁸⁵ U.S. Federal Trade Commission. *A Review of Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents: Follow-Up Report*. 2012. <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/review-food-marketing-children-and-adolescents-follow-report/121221foodmarketingreport.pdf>.

¹⁸⁶ Harris J et al. *Increasing Disparities in Unhealthy Food Advertising Targeted to Hispanic and Black Youth*. UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity, Council on Black Health, & Salud America! January 2019. <http://uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/TargetedMarketingReport2019.pdf>.

¹⁸⁷ Collin J et al. Signalling Virtue, Promoting Harm: Unhealthy Commodity Industries and COVID-19. *NCD Alliance, SPECTRUM*. 2020. https://ncdal-liance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/Signalling%20Virtue%2C%20Promoting%20Harm_Sept2020_FINALv.pdf.

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¹⁹¹ N.Y.C. Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *Double Your Money: Health Department Partners with Supermarkets to Make Fruits and Vegetables More Affordable for New Yorkers Who Use SNAP*. November 21, 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2019/health-department-partners-with-supermarkets.page>.

¹⁹² New York City Department of Health. *Free Fruits, Vegetables and Beans at Supermarkets with SNAP/EBT*. 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/free-produce-snap.page>.

¹⁹³ Healthy Food America. *Healthy Food Pricing Incentives: A Systematic Review of Current Pricing Incentives*. June 2019. <https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/healthyfoodamerica/pages/431/attachments/original/1561034550/Systematicreviewnarrative.pdf?1561034550>.

¹⁹⁴ McCarthy J, Minovi D, Wootan M. *Scroll and Shop: Food Marketing Migrates Online*. Center for Science in the Public Interest. January 2020. https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/Scroll_and_Shop_report.pdf.

¹⁹⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *New York: COVID-19 Waivers and Flexibilities*. September 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/new-york>.

¹⁹⁶ McLoughlin GM, McCarthy JE, McGuire J, Singleton CR, Dunn CG, Gadhoke P. Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0>.

¹⁹⁷ Pratt-Heavner D. *SNA Survey Reveals COVID-19 School Meal Trends, Financial Impacts*. School Nutrition Association. May 18, 2020. <https://schoolnutrition.org/news-publications/press-releases/2020/sna-survey-reveals-covid-19-school-meal-trends-financial-impacts/>.

who do not.¹⁹⁸ With fewer children eating school meals, researchers predict that school closures may exacerbate childhood obesity and increase disparities in obesity risk.¹⁹⁹

Standards Help Ensure Institutional Meals are Nutritious

The federal government requires that the meals it helps local governments purchase—meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP),²⁰⁰ School Breakfast Program (SBP),²⁰¹ Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP),²⁰² and Senior Nutrition Program²⁰³—meet certain criteria. NYC has set nutrition standards for food that exceed the federal government's.

Food standards work. A recent study of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act, legislation that improved standards for school meals and limited unhealthy food marketing in schools, showed that the updated standards reduced the risk of obesity for children in poverty.²⁰⁴

GetFoodNYC, like the school meals service, was plagued with complaints around meal

variety and temperature. The initiative also was the target of additional complaints about food freshness and healthfulness.²⁰⁵ Food served through the program was required to meet NYC Food Standards, but many meals did not. For example, one couple only received bags of potato chips, cookies, and onion rings. A diabetic woman reported getting food incompatible with the diet she is required to maintain. NYC Food Czar Kathryn Garcia acknowledged the complaints, explaining, “We have over 30 vendors who are supporting us in this effort, and we have very strict nutritional requirements within their contracts. If any are not meeting them, please make sure to let us know because we want to hold them accountable to deliver the food that we’re paying for.”²⁰⁶

Concerned about quality and compliance, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams and Councilmember Ben Kallos introduced a bill that would require the City to review *GetFoodNYC* menus for compliance, to provide vendors with support to meet nutritional requirements, and to collect feedback from participants.²⁰⁷

Factors that may have influenced the City’s ability to consistently provide high quality, nutritious meals include vendor’s unfamiliarity with meal standards, rapid expansion of a new program, and food safety concerns. Again, NYC needs to collect and evaluate more information to understand the impact of the *GetFoodNYC* initiative on diet quality.

NYC Needs More Information to Understand the Healthfulness of Foods Distributed through the Emergency Food System

Emergency food providers, like the NYC DOE, had established, centralized networks; a large workforce; and existing infrastructure from which they could distribute. But, like *GetFoodNYC*, rapid expansion and a workforce staffed with many unfamiliar faces might have hindered implementation at times. Many individuals interviewed from our research spoke positively about the quality and freshness of food they obtained through free deliveries and pantries. One participant stated that with the deliveries, she was able to eat more nutritious foods that she normally could not afford. “I am eating more vegetables because there are more vegetables in the food (deliveries), and it has been good. I have changed my diet.”²⁰⁸

Accessing these healthier foods did not come without some difficulty. One interviewee stressed that timing was important when frequenting the pantries, as arriving “early” offered an opportunity to get better quality produce. Observations from another suggests

that more promotion of farm fresh produce, like that purchased through *Nourish New York*, is needed. This interviewee, who both works at and uses a pantry, explained that some patrons perceive the fruits and vegetables as “bad” or “damaged” when they see dirt on the produce, not realizing that the food was boxed and transported from the farm and “right out of the ground.”²⁰⁹ Knowledge of novel items, cooking skills, and access to cooking facilities may be additional barriers.

At the institutional level, lower staffing and shutdowns probably made serving healthy foods more difficult. As fewer individuals volunteered, pantries had less capacity to organize and distribute fresh items. At the same time, organizations that typically donate food, like restaurants and hotels, closed.²¹⁰

Many Food Banks and Pantries Lack Formal Nutrition Policies

A recent survey of 196 food banks across the country found that only one third have formal nutrition policies, policies that they elected to adopt, and only one in seven has banned items such as soda and candy as part of that policy.²¹¹ On average, fresh produce constitutes a third of food distributed, and unhealthy beverages and snacks a quarter of food distributed.

¹⁹⁸ Au L, Gurzo K, Gosliner W et al. Regular Consumption of School Meals Can Improve Dietary Intake, as Students Who Eat School Meals Every Day Consume More Fruits and Vegetables, Fiber, and Whole Grains Compared to Those Who Do Not. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 2018;118(8):1474-1481.e1. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2018.01.010.

¹⁹⁹ Rundle AG, Park Y, Herbstman J, Kinsey EW, Wang YC. COVID-19 Related School Closings and Risk of Weight Gain Among Children. *Obesity*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22813>.

²⁰⁰ 7 CFR § 210.10 - Meal requirements for Lunches and Requirements for Afterschool Snacks.

²⁰¹ 7 CFR § 220.8 - Meal Requirements for Breakfasts.

²⁰² 7 CFR § 226.20 - Requirements for Meals.

²⁰³ 42 U.S. Code § 3030g-21. Nutrition.

²⁰⁴ Kenney E et al. Impact of The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on Obesity Trends. *Health Affairs*. 2020;39.7. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00133>.

²⁰⁵ Kramer M. Demanding Answers: NYC’s COVID-19 Program Accused of Delivering Spoiled Food, Items with No Nutrition Value. *CBS New York*. May 18, 2020. <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2020/05/18/demanding-answers-nycs-covid-19-program-accused-of-delivering-spoiled-food-items-with-no-nutrition-value/>.

²⁰⁶ Kramer M. Demanding Answers: NYC’s COVID-19 Program Accused of Delivering Spoiled Food, Items with No Nutrition Value. *CBS New York*. May 18, 2020. <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2020/05/18/demanding-answers-nycs-covid-19-program-accused-of-delivering-spoiled-food-items-with-no-nutrition-value/>.

²⁰⁷ Kirker K. Adams, Kallos Introduce Bill to Mandate Nutrition Standards for Food Provided by the City. *Gotham Gazette*. May 27, 2020. <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/9439-bill-to-mandate-nutrition-standards-new-york-city-food-meals-adams-kallos#:~:text=Brooklyn%20Borough%20President%20Eric%20Adams,of%20food%20for%20hundreds%20of>.

²⁰⁸ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Findings from the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Interviews with NYC Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. July and August, 2020.

²¹⁰ Kulish N. ‘Never Seen Anything Like It’: Cars Line Up for Miles at Food Banks. *New York Times*. April 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/business/economy/coronavirus-food-banks.html>.

²¹¹ Feldman M, Schwartz M. *A Tipping Point: Leveraging Opportunities to Improve the Nutritional Quality of Food Bank Inventory*. MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. March 2018. <https://mazon.org/assets/download-files/MAZON-TippingPointReport-FINAL.pdf>.

Recommendations to Improve Diet Quality

High quality food and good nutrition can protect against instability like the kind the COVID-19 pandemic has created.²¹² In the long run, NYC needs to develop policies and programs that decrease the promotion and consumption of highly processed unhealthy foods. To support healthy, affordable, and culturally-relevant diets now, NYC should:

- Monitor retail, institutional food, and emergency food programs' impact on diet quality and address nutrition-related inequities which occur because of income and race.
- Continue to invest in the Get the Good Stuff Program.
- Advocate for increased federal, state and City funds for institutional food programs to ensure that they have the proper resources (for example, refrigeration, storage, cooking facilities, and training) to provide healthy meals.
- Encourage organizations that participate in the City's Emergency Food Program to establish nutrition standards for foods they distribute.
- Develop food plans for future emergencies that include concrete steps to support high quality diets.



Food Workforce: COVID-19 Changed Working Conditions, Pay, and Risk for the NYC Food Workforce

²¹² Naja F. Hamadeh R. Nutrition Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Multi-Level Framework for Action. *European Journal on Clinical Nutrition*. 2020;74:1117-1121. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41430-020-0634-3>.

Food Workforce: COVID-19 Changed Working Conditions, Pay, and Risk for the NYC Food Workforce

COVID-19 dramatically changed the lives of food workers, the people who work in food production, food retail, food service, and food delivery. It posed new health risks for these workers and caused tens of thousands to lose their jobs and benefits.²¹³ At the same time, COVID-19 increased food workers' visibility because they were increasingly considered essential to the survival of the City and region.²¹⁴ This section:

- Explains the factors that make the food workforce vulnerable,
- Describes how COVID-19 changed restaurant, food retail, delivery, manufacturing, institutional meal, and emergency food work,
- Lists inadequacies in local and federal policies, and
- Recommends local, state, and federal policy changes to improve food workers' lives.

The Food Workforce Is Especially Vulnerable

Prior to the pandemic, the food workforce was growing. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of jobs in the food and beverages service sector in NYC increased by 23%, to 315,200 jobs, making it the third largest in the city, after education and professional/technical services. It was also the lowest paid sector, with an average annual income of \$31,500.²¹⁵

But the pandemic led to major job losses across NYC and New York State, including for food services. By July 2020, the overall unemployment rate for NYC was 19.8%, five times higher than the rate in July 2019. In New York State, excluding NYC, the July 2020 unemployment rate was 13.1%, about 3 times higher than the July 2019 rate.²¹⁶ NYC had the largest loss of private sector jobs—646,100. The number and proportion of overall private sector jobs lost between January and July 2020 far exceeded the losses during the recessions of 1989–1992, 2000–2003, and 2008–2009.²¹⁷ Today, as in the past, Black and Latinx workers lost jobs at higher rates than White workers and were slower to return to work.²¹⁸

Characteristics of the food workforce make its members especially vulnerable. These include low wages, limited benefits, and unsafe

working conditions. Nationally, only 55% of essential workers in the food service industry have access to paid sick leave.²¹⁹ In New York State, those working in food services were more likely to lack health insurance, report frequent physical distress in the previous month, and have a history of a depressive disorder when compared to other employed adults.²²⁰

The working environment of most food workers exposes them (and then their families) to the risks of interactions with clients, customers, or co-workers, along with the risks of using public transportation to get to work.²²¹ For example, of the 1,860 people who work at the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market, 52 workers (2.8 %) tested positive for the virus by April 21, a much higher percentage than among the general public as of that date. Yet no businesses in Hunts Point closed due to COVID-19.²²² People of color who work in the food sector are less likely to work in jobs that shield them from risks. According to one national study, 56.5% of Black individuals and 64.5% of Latinx individuals at high risk for COVID-19 work in jobs that preclude working from home, including food work. Among White workers, only 46.6% in the high-risk category work in these riskier occupations.²²³

High proportions of workers are at risk due to discrimination based on immigration status. Of the limited benefits and protections that exist for food workers, most are unavailable to undocumented workers, putting them at higher risk of harm. Immigrant workers, documented and undocumented, constitute a significant proportion of the food workforce. In New York State, only healthcare and transportation employ more immigrants. According to a report from the Center for Migrant Studies New York, immigrants constitute 39% of workers in restaurants, 32% in grocery and other food stores, almost 30% in food and beverage manufacturing and processing, and 16% in the state's agricultural workers. An estimated 74,700 undocumented immigrants work in New York State restaurants—18,400 in small and large grocery stores, 5,900 in food manufacturing, and 3,700 in agriculture.²²⁴

Women, like immigrants, are also likely to hold more vulnerable food jobs. They make up a majority of the food sector workforce and typically work in lower paid jobs.²²⁵ Because women typically shoulder more of the responsibilities for child care, elder care, and the household, their holding low-paid jobs with unpredictable schedules has a negative impact on their families.

²¹⁹ Schneider D, Harknett K. *Essential and Vulnerable: Service-Sector Workers and Paid Sick Leave*. Shift Project. 2020. https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/files/2020/04/Essential_and_Vulnerable_Service_Sector_Workers_and_Paid_Sick_Leave.pdf.

²²⁰ Bureau of Occupational Health and Injury Prevention. *New York State Worker Health Chartbook. Findings from the New York Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2013-2016*. New York State Department of Health. 2019. https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/brfss/reports/docs/nys_worker_health_chartbook_2013-2016.pdf.

²²¹ Krisberg K. Essential Workers Facing Higher Risks During COVID-19 Outbreak: Meat Packers, Retail Workers Sickened. *The Nation's Health*. 2020. 50 (6) 1-16. <https://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/50/6/1.1>.

²²² He G. How NYC's Most Important Food Hub Is Still Keeping the City Fed. *New York Eater*. April 29, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/29/21239298/hunts-point-nyc-food-hub-coronavirus-photos>.

²²³ Selden TM, Berdahl TA. COVID-19 And Racial/Ethnic Disparities In Health Risk, Employment, And Household Composition: Study examines potential explanations for racial-ethnic disparities in COVID-19 hospitalizations and mortality. *Health Affairs*. 2020;10-377. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00897>.

²²⁴ Center for Migration Studies of New York. *Immigrants Comprise 31 Percent of Workers in New York State Essential Businesses and 70 Percent of the State's Undocumented Labor Force Works in Essential Businesses*. 2020. <https://cmsny.org/publications/new-york-essential-workers/#:~:text=Foreign%20born%20workers%20comprise%2031,sector%20workers%20in%20the%20state>.

²²⁵ The Percentage of Women and Men in Each Profession. *The Boston Globe*. March 6, 2017. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/03/06/chart-the-percentage-women-and-men-each-profession/GBX22YsWl0XaeHghwXfE4H/story.html>.

²¹³ New York State Department of Labor. *New York State Labor Market Overview-July 2020*. 2020. <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/overview2.pdf>.

²¹⁴ PR Newswire. Americans Show a New Appreciation for Essential Workers, Says Reputation Leaders. May 14, 2020. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/americans-show-a-new-appreciation-for-essential-workers-says-reputation-leaders-301059693.html>.

²¹⁵ Bureau of Labor Market Information. *Division of Research and Statistics. Significant Industries NYC, 2019*. New York State Department of Labor. 2020. <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/PDFs/Significant-Industries-New-York-City.pdf>.

²¹⁶ New York State Department of Labor. *New York State Labor Market Overview-July 2020*. 2020. <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/overview2.pdf>.

²¹⁷ New York State Department of Labor. *New York State Labor Market Overview-July 2020*. 2020. <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/overview2.pdf>.

²¹⁸ Parrott JA, Moe L. *The COVID-19 NYC Economy Three Months In: Reopening, and a Continuing Low-Wage Worker Recession*. Center for NYC Affairs. 2020. <http://www.centernyc.org/reports-briefs/2020/6/29/the-covid-19-new-york-city-economy-three-months-in-reopening-and-a-continuing-low-wage-worker-recession>.

Unemployment Hit the Restaurant Sector Hard

According to the New York State Restaurant Association, by April 21, 2020, more than 527,000 restaurant employees in the state had been laid off or furloughed, about 80% of the 659,500 employees that were working in February 2020.²²⁶ The Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis reported that employment in NYC restaurants and bars dropped from 324,630 in February 2020 to 90,855 in April 2020. Employment rose to 161,990 in July 2020, still only about half the jobs that existed six months earlier.²²⁷

Meanwhile, major corporations — companies more likely to have the resources to weather the downturn — have been denying workers paid sick leave.^{228,229} According to a report by Public Citizen, major national food and food service companies hire more workers who do not have paid sick leave than any other sector. In the U.S., McDonald's employed 518,000 workers without paid sick leave prior to the pandemic, but began offering it to some of its workers after the pandemic.^{230,231}

NYC had passed a paid sick leave law in 2014, but some food chains have not complied.²³² In early 2020, just prior to the start of the pandemic, Chipotle workers in NYC walked off the job, calling on the fast-casual chain to comply with the City's law. "Even if you call off, you will receive retaliation in some way," Kendra Avila, a Chipotle employee in Manhattan, told a reporter. "At my store, it's confusing on how to even get [sick leave]. To them, if you call out, you're sabotaging their day and their chance of making money."²³³ The pandemic makes a compelling case for ensuring that all workers in NYC and New York State have paid sick leave.²³⁴

Despite Being Deemed Essential, Food Retail Workers Also Faced Difficulties

Early in the pandemic, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) launched a national initiative to help protect the nation's food and grocery store workers who continued working during the quarantine under the designation as essential

workers.²³⁵ The campaign featured nationwide digital and TV commercials and targeted American grocery shoppers. Its goals were protecting the nation's food supply while at the same time safeguarding grocery store workers from becoming exposed to the coronavirus.²³⁶

Some food worker organizations and elected officials proposed a "hazard pay" bonus to essential food workers during the pandemic.²³⁷ Some labor organizers objected to the idea of hazard pay, making the case that no workers should ever be expected to work in hazardous conditions. Employers objected for another reason; they claimed they could not afford to pay any bonuses.²³⁸

One study found that when grocery workers did go to work, their employers often did not enforce mask wearing or social distancing and did not provide workers with PPE.²³⁹ An unaccounted for number of grocery and retail workers have gotten sick from COVID-19 and some have died; many lack any employer-provided education on avoiding COVID-19 infection.²⁴⁰

According to CNBC News, major retailers, psychologists, and the nation's top grocery worker union predicted a greater need for mental health services such as therapy for retail workers, as people continued to work during the pandemic and later had to cope with its aftermath. Anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges may linger, even as coronavirus cases level out or decline — especially for those on the front line.²⁴¹

According to the New York State Department of Labor, between July 2019 and July 2020, the state lost 112,500 jobs in food and non-food retail outlets, 16,000 of which were in supermarkets and grocery stores.²⁴²

As Demand for Food Delivery Grew, So Too Did Jobs

Stay-at-home orders led to a surge in the demand for food delivery services from people unable or afraid to leave their homes.²⁴³ This demand provided employment for many recently unemployed workers. But few of the low-wage, part-time workers in this sector have financial benefits, and some workers

²²⁶ New York State Restaurant Association. *Survey Shows New York's Restaurant Industry Still Crushed by COVID-19; State's Decline Continues to Outpace National Averages*. 2020. https://www.nysra.org/uploads/1/2/1/3/121352550/ny_survey_covid_impact_press_release.pdf.

²²⁷ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. *All Employees: Leisure and Hospitality: Food Services and Drinking Places in NYC, NY*. 2020. <https://fred.stlouis-fed.org/series/SMU36935617072200001SA>.

²²⁸ Schneider D & Harknett K. *Estimates of Workers Who Lack Access to Paid Sick Leave at 91 Large Service Sector Employers*. The Shift Project. 2020. <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/paid-sick-leave-brief/>.

²²⁹ Claypool R. *Corporate Accountability: The Next Coronavirus Casualty?* Public Citizen. June 11, 2020. <https://www.citizen.org/article/corporate-accountability-the-next-coronavirus-casualty/>.

²³⁰ Schneider D & Harknett K. *Estimates of Workers Who Lack Access to Paid Sick Leave at 91 Large Service Sector Employers*. The Shift Project. 2020. <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/paid-sick-leave-brief/>.

²³¹ Regalado N. *McDonald's Employees Are Working Through the COVID-19 Pandemic. So Why Don't They Have Access to Paid Sick and Family Leave?* ACLU. May 1, 2020. <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/mcdonalds-employees-are-working-through-the-covid-19-pandemic-so-why-dont-they-have-access-to-paid-sick-and-family-leave/>.

²³² Del Valle G. *Workers at National Restaurant Chains are Not Covered by New Sick Leave Bill*. Vox. Mar 16, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/3/13/21178879/coronavirus-covid-19-restaurant-workers-sick-leave-chipotle-mcdonalds>.

²³³ Del Valle G. *Workers at National Restaurant Chains are Not Covered by New Sick Leave Bill*. Vox. Mar 16, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/3/13/21178879/coronavirus-covid-19-restaurant-workers-sick-leave-chipotle-mcdonalds>.

²³⁴ Stankiewicz M. *Coronavirus Pandemic Response Requires Paid Sick Leave*. Public Citizen. March 19, 2020. <https://www.citizen.org/article/coronavirus-pandemic-response-requires-paid-sick-leave/>.

²³⁵ Eyewitness News. *Campaign aims to safeguard grocery store workers amid pandemic*. WABC News NY. April 13, 2020. <https://abc7ny.com/shopsmart-grocery-shopping-coronavirus-nyc-update/6100382/>.

²³⁶ Harris K, Perrone M. *Why grocery store workers deserve hazard pay*. CNN Opinion. August 7, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/06/opinions/why-grocery-store-workers-deserve-hazard-pay-harris-perrone/index.html>.

²³⁷ Harris K, Perrone M. *Why grocery store workers deserve hazard pay*. CNN Opinion. August 7, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/06/opinions/why-grocery-store-workers-deserve-hazard-pay-harris-perrone/index.html>.

²³⁸ Warkerkar T. *Some NYC Grocery Chains Say Hazard Pay Would Force Layoffs and Store Closures*. New York Eater. April 27, 2020. <https://ny.eater.com/2020/4/27/21234964/nyc-grocery-store-hazard-pay-layoffs-morton-williams>.

²³⁹ Schneider D, Harknett K. *Essential and Unprotected: COVID-19-Related Health and Safety Procedures for Service-Sector Workers*. Shift. 2020. <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/files/2020/05/Essential-and-Unprotected-COVID-19-Health-Safety.pdf>.

²⁴⁰ Dungca N, Abelson J, Bhattarai A, Kornfield M. *On the Front Lines of The Pandemic, Grocery Workers Are in the Dark About Risks*. Washington Post. May 24, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2020/05/24/grocery-workers-coronavirus-risks/?arc404=true>.

²⁴¹ Repko M. *For Grocery Workers, the Need for Mental Health Care May Outlast Coronavirus Pandemic*. WCNBC News April 16 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/16/grocery-store-workers-need-for-mental-health-care-may-outlast-pandemic.html>.

²⁴² New York State Department of Labor. *NYS Economy Added 244,200 Private Sector Jobs in July 2020*. 2020. <https://www.labor.ny.gov/pressreleases/2020/august-20-2020.shtm>.

²⁴³ Heins S. *Who Are the People Who Deliver New York's Food?* Grub Street. March 18, 2020. <https://www.grubstreet.com/2020/03/nyc-food-delivery-workers-portraits.html>.

reported problems such as withheld tips and lack of sick leave.^{244,245,246}

In 2012, the NYC Department of Transportation estimated that 50,000 bicycle food deliverers worked in NYC,²⁴⁷ a number that is likely to have grown with the pandemic. Other messengers deliver on foot, by motor scooter, or by car. Food delivery messengers, before and after COVID-19, face a variety of risks including traffic injuries, inclement weather, crime, lack of tips, and prejudice against immigrants.²⁴⁸

As Wilfred Chan, a food deliverer in NYC, wrote in *The Guardian*, “It was already a dangerous job—our injury rates run up to 44 times those of the average American job; seven of us were killed in New York in 2019 alone—and it has become far more dangerous now. We are called ‘heroes’ and finally being acknowledged as ‘essential’, but the truth is this job was never the first choice for many of us.” Chan explained that food delivery platforms like Uber Eats, Grubhub, and DoorDash consider their deliverers to be independent contractors who are not entitled to health insurance, worker’s compensation, or other benefits. “When the outbreak began,” Chan wrote, “the apps simply sent out emails

that sounded copy-and-pasted from the CDC, ‘Stay home and wash your hands!’”²⁴⁹

More recently, some delivery apps have waived commission fees for restaurants and cut customers’ delivery fees to zero.²⁵⁰ However, they have not provided bonuses or hazard pay for workers. Some employers have promised up to two weeks’ pay if a worker presents proof of a COVID-19 diagnosis, but Chan reports that workers who have requested payments say the process is a nightmare.²⁵¹

Food deliverers struggled to find the right balance between serving their customers and keeping themselves safe. Jamal, who delivers food in the Greenwich Village neighborhood in Manhattan explains, “We have to stay clean, so we don’t pass it around. That’s why we try not to go upstairs. It’s not to be rude—it’s safer for all of us. Let’s say, not knowing it, one of us carries it. If we go into a building with a lot of elderly, we’d be walking down their hallway carrying it.”²⁵²

Grocers who previously didn’t offer delivery also moved into the delivery business during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these used online delivery services such as

Instacart, while other chains hired deliverers themselves. Many new food delivery workers complained of poor working conditions, inadequate benefits, and safety equipment, and, occasionally, wage theft.²⁵³

In March 2020, Instacart’s food deliverers went on strike charging that the delivery service puts Instacart’s gig workers, who the company calls “shoppers,” at risk of coronavirus exposure. Workers demanded the company offer more protections such as hand sanitizer, disinfectant, hazard pay of \$5 per order, and an expansion to the current sick-pay policy. “Basically, I’m playing Russian roulette every time I go out there, every time I shop, every time I come into a grocery store,” Instacart worker Mia Kelly said.²⁵⁴

Food Manufacturing, Production, and Distribution Jobs Remained Relatively Unharmful

Unlike other businesses, food manufacturers were not required to close or reduce their workforce as a result of the pandemic. This sector comprises a small, but occasionally better paid component of the NYC and regional food workforce. It includes transportation, food hub, and warehouse workers and represents about 13% of the state’s manufacturing jobs.²⁵⁵ Future reports from NYC Food 20/20 will address food

labor issues in NYC’s small manufacturing, production, and distribution systems.

With Changes to the City’s Institutional and Emergency Food Programs, Workers’ Responsibilities Shifted

Other integral parts of the food system impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic are the institutional and emergency food systems.

Staff who serve school meals comprise one of the largest portions of the institutional meal workforce. Prior to the pandemic, school food staff served 950,000 meals every week day.²⁵⁶ An estimated 9,000 workers are employed by the NYC Office of Food and Nutrition Services alone, most of them with union wages and benefits.^{257,258} As NYC school food workers shifted from serving meals in school cafeterias to preparing grab-and-go meals, their workload changed significantly. “It’s tiring, but it’s worth it,” said head cook Luis Mendoza Jr. at one Brooklyn school. “Seeing the people getting fed in this time we are living in, seeing them happy. It blesses me,” said Mendoza. Food service manager Peggy Bobadilla said the team has willingly skipped vacation days and left their own families to serve the community during this pandemic. “It’s our duty to NYC,” Bobadilla explained.²⁵⁹

²⁴⁴ Garsd J. “Delete the Delivery Apps,” Say Restaurants Hard Hit By COVID-19. *Marketplace*. April 16, 2020. <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/04/16/restaurants-hit-covid19-say-delete-delivery-apps/>.

²⁴⁵ Smith R. *Independent Contractors and COVID-19: Working Without Protections*. National Employment Law Project. March 24, 2020. <https://www.nelp.org/publication/independent-contractors-covid-19-working-without-protections/>.

²⁴⁶ Chan W. I am a New York Food Courier. Right Now, It’s Worse Than You Think. *The Guardian*. April 3, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/wilfred-chan>.

²⁴⁷ NYC Council. *The Transcript of the minutes of the Committee of Transportation on September 6, 2012*. 2012. <https://www.legistar.council.nyc.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=2113232&GUID=53DA73A3-5939-4F6F-880B0E94AD274D52>.

²⁴⁸ Lee DJ. *Delivering Justice: Food Delivery Cyclists in New York City*. The Graduate Center, City University of New York. 2018. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3854&context=gc_etds.

²⁴⁹ Chan W. I am a New York Food Courier. Right Now, It’s Worse Than You Think. *The Guardian*. April 3, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/wilfred-chan>.

²⁵⁰ Chan W. I am a New York Food Courier. Right Now, It’s Worse Than You Think. *The Guardian*. April 3, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/wilfred-chan>.

²⁵¹ Chan W. I am a New York Food Courier. Right Now, It’s Worse Than You Think. *The Guardian*. April 3, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/wilfred-chan>.

²⁵² Heins S. Who Are the People Who Deliver New York’s Food? *Grub Street*. March 18, 2020. <https://www.grubstreet.com/2020/03/nyc-food-delivery-workers-portraits.html>.

²⁵³ Pardes A. Essential Workers Unite for a May Day Strike. Is It Enough? *Wired*. May 1, 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/amazon-instacart-target-coronavirus-may-day-strike/>.

²⁵⁴ Amazon workers in NYC walk out, Instacart employees consider strike. *WABCTV News NY*. March 30, 2020. <https://abc7ny.com/amazon-walk-out-instacart-strike-coronavirus-nyc-grocery-delivery/6062675/>.

²⁵⁵ The Business Council of New York State. *Manufacturing by The Numbers A Profile of New York’s Manufacturing Sector by Jobs, Wages and Regional Impact*. The Public Policy Institute. 2019. <http://www.ppinys.org/reports/2019/19-0153-PPI-Manufacturing-by-the-Numbers%20Report.pdf>.

²⁵⁶ The City of New York Mayor’s Office for Food Policy. *Food Metrics Report*. 2019. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Policy-Report-2019.pdf>.

²⁵⁷ McQueen G. My Members are Being overlooked.” DC 37 Head Calls for Greater Worker Protection. *Manhattan Times*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.manhattantimesnews.com/my-members-are-being-overlookedmis-miembros-estan-siendo-ignorados-2/>

²⁵⁸ Dunn, EG. In School Kitchens, Worries After a Summer Service. *New York Times*. September 20, 2020.

²⁵⁹ Leigh D. Coronavirus News: NYC School Cafeterias Averaging Nearly 500,000 Meals per Day Amid Pandemic. *WABC News*. May 8, 2020. <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-school-cafeterias-meals-7-on-your-side-department-of-education/6161148/>.

However, many employees and volunteers, often older people fearful of contracting COVID-19, left their roles at emergency food programs. While exact counts are not yet available, it is estimated that a very high percentage of the city's approximately 1,000 food pantries closed in the first few months of the pandemic because of staffing problems.²⁶⁰

Future reports will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected food workers in other institutional settings in NYC including hospitals, jails, homeless shelters, and other settings.

Federal and City Policies Have Not Adequately Protected Food Workers from Economic Harm

Across sectors, NYC, New York State, and the federal government initiated emergency programs to provide relief for food workers who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures supplemented an existing patchwork of programs designed to buffer the effects of unemployment. The federal Paycheck Protection Program, for example, though critiqued for flawed execution²⁶¹ and controversial disbursements,²⁶² was created to support restaurants and other small businesses. It has dispersed \$521 billion in loans nationally as of June 2020, with restaurants constituting the largest number (approximately 170,500 of approved loans.)²⁶³

A report by the NYC Comptroller found that only 12% of eligible NYC businesses received federal dollars from the Personal Paycheck Protection program, one of the lowest rates nationwide.²⁶⁴ Restaurants and bars lagged behind other industries. Only 41% of the restaurants and bars in NYC received paycheck protection while 89% of the city's hotels and 66% of its management consulting firms received this support.

In June, NYC announced a \$3 million plan to help City restaurants forced to close in the face of COVID-19. The plan included subsidized pay for 1,000 furloughed workers at \$20/hour for at least six weeks, and one-time cash assistance for employees at eligible restaurants.²⁶⁵ The plan also included an important and progressive condition for funding. Restaurants partaking in the program had to commit to pay employees at least \$15/hour plus tips within five years of the return of "normal business" post COVID-19.

Recommendations to Protect Food Workers

In the long run, NYC, food employers, unions, and elected officials should develop a comprehensive workforce development strategy that will provide all food workers with decent pay, adequate benefits, safe working conditions, and opportunities for advancement. In the short run, more modest steps are needed.

NYC should:

- Identify additional funding streams to avoid layoffs for essential public food workers.
- Ensure that all local, state, and federal benefit programs for workers are accessible to all food workers, especially those with the lowest pay and least benefits.
- Monitor workplace health and safety violations.

New York state should:

- Increase the minimum wage.
- Strengthen and expand paid sick leave, not limited by worker status or employer size.
- Rescind laws that shield employers from liability for failing to protect the health of workers.

The federal government should:

- Eliminate penalties on unemployment insurance for workers with both wages and self-employment earnings.
- Strengthen workers' right to refuse unsafe work and still remain eligible for unemployment.
- Rescind laws that shield employers from liability for failing to protect the health of customers or workers.

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²⁶² Macneal C & Gordon N. Corrupted: How the PPP Loans Favored the Historically Advantaged. *POGO*. August 6, 2020. <https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2020/08/corrupted-how-the-ppp-loans-favored-the-historically-advantaged/>.

²⁶³ USA Facts. *Restaurants, Lawyers, and Real Estate Agents: Who Received 4.9M PPP Loans and How Long It Will Last Them*. July 30, 2020. <https://usafacts.org/articles/restaurants-lawyers-and-real-estate-agents-who-received-49m-ppp-loans-and-how-long-it-will-last-them/>.

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²⁶⁵ Domenech OA. City Launches Initiative to 'Save' Restaurants Shuttered by Novel Coronavirus Pandemic. *QNS*. June 12, 2020. <https://qns.com/story/2020/06/12/city-launches-initiative-to-save-restaurants-shuttered-by-novel-coronavirus-pandemic/>.



Joel Muniz

Conclusion

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Strengths and Weaknesses of NYC's COVID-19 Response

An assessment of the first six months of responses to COVID-19 in NYC shows both strengths and weaknesses. In each of the domains we examined—food policy, food security, diet quality, food retail, and food labor—city government, residents, community agencies, food businesses, and food workers acted aggressively to identify and fix food system problems that the pandemic created. Key actors considered new approaches to solve long-standing vulnerabilities in the local food system that the pandemic illuminated.

However, our assessment also found significant problems in the City's response, including lack of adequate emergency plans; difficulty coordinating responses across city agencies and nonprofit groups; limited capacity for evaluation and improvement; and insufficient focus on reducing the nutritional, health, and social disparities that income and race have created in NYC. A closer look at the five domains we studied provides an overview of these strengths and weaknesses.

Policy

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, City, state, and federal agencies launched a panoply of programs to address its food-related consequences. These policy responses demonstrated the government's capacity to move quickly to address urgent problems, adapt as conditions changed or feedback required, and coordinate. For example, the rapid increase in food security assistance and the dramatic expansion of unemployment benefits illustrate these successes.

But, these responses also highlighted long-standing limitations of governance. Facing

unprecedented threats, federal, state and city elected officials continued to squabble over authority and posture for public benefit, diminishing credibility and public trust.

Driven in part by an understandable crisis mentality, public officials made few efforts to evaluate programs or determine the impact of their efforts on food insecurity or diet quality. This lack of assessment hinders NYC's ability to effectively improve programs, maximize limited resources, and ensure accountability. In our next report, we will examine evaluation efforts to-date and suggest improvements.

Public officials made limited efforts to address the pre-existing racial, ethnic, and income inequalities in food security, food access, diet quality, and food labor conditions that characterize New York. With new resources, a new spirit of community and civic mobilization, and the determination to "build back better," NYC can create the conditions to make the City a more fair, healthy, and food-secure place. But a sharp focus on tackling these inequities is necessary.

Food Insecurity

To address rapid increases in food insecurity, city and local non-profits acted forcefully and relatively quickly to make more food available using traditional and new approaches. Despite the financial constraints that the pandemic created, NYC mobilized unparalleled resources to address food insecurity. The City's responses helped many households avoid or reduce food insecurity.

Public and non-profit agencies provided millions of free meals to all NYC residents. The City's bold approach to ensure that all NYC residents had access to food recognizes that food is a basic right, not to be offered and then withdrawn at whim or available only for those deemed worthy of assistance. How to establish food as a basic human right that can be sustained and amplified beyond the

pandemic is a critical question that we will address in our next report.

The response to rising food insecurity also exposed cracks in the City's food system. Despite its efforts, rates of food insecurity nearly doubled, suggesting that more robust, comprehensive policies and programs are needed to prevent further increases in food insecurity.

Both before and during the pandemic, a significant portion of food security efforts have depended on charity. Charitable organizations have helped hundreds of thousands of NYC residents cope with food insecurity. But, over the past 50 years, they have not reduced the scope of the problem or advanced a vision of a hunger-free city. These systems fail to address the fundamental causes of food insecurity: persistent rates of poverty, high numbers of low-wage workers, a limited public food sector, and growing income and wealth inequality.

The coordinating mechanisms that the City established, such as the Food Czar Team, were an important step in the right direction. These mechanisms highlight NYC's previous failures to tackle food security in a coordinated, focused manner. The lack of a coordinated system prior to the pandemic suggests that many continue to believe that high levels of food insecurity are an inevitable fact of life in the world's wealthiest city.

Food Retail and Restaurants

Despite some early supply chain problems, the City's supermarkets, grocery stores, and bodegas continued to function through the pandemic—an impressive accomplishment. Businesses showed flexibility and ingenuity, devising safety rules that allowed them to stay open and make customers feel relatively safe.

As the main supplier of NYC residents' food, retail outlets became an even more important source of food as other important food providers shut down or drastically curtailed their operations. Had so many food stores not been willing and able to accept SNAP, emergency food programs would have been even more overwhelmed, and many more NYC residents might have experienced food insecurity.

But supermarkets, grocery stores, and bodegas continue to sell mostly highly processed products, especially to customers with less spending power, living in less-resourced communities. Most retail outlets continue to sell mainly products that increase the risks for chronic diet-related diseases and now, the COVID-19 virus.

Restaurants and fast food outlets were mostly shut until the summer, before opening partially for outdoor and limited indoor services. Economic prospects for the City's restaurant industry look bleak. Developing a vision to restore, revitalize, and make the City's restaurant and fast food sector healthier should be a priority.

Significant evidence exists on the potential benefits of a regional, sustainably-oriented food system, of which the retail supply chain is an essential component. Developing a more regional approach for our food system can help to prevent future disruptions and promote health and economic development.

Diet Quality

Institutional meal and emergency food providers had the unenviable task of balancing rising food insecurity with nutritional quality. Overcoming the formidable logistical and operational challenges of getting food to a million newly food-insecure NYC residents, many public and non-profit emergency food programs relied on packaged shelf-stable food products. These products are easier to transport, store, and distribute than fresh produce. They are also less healthy. Ultra-processed products are also a major cause of premature death and preventable illnesses in NYC (including COVID-19) and a fundamental cause of the City's income and racial/ethnic health inequities. The City must develop food plans for future emergencies that include concrete steps to support high quality diets.

Food Workforce

Before the pandemic, low pay, inadequate benefits, lack of paid sick leave, and risky working conditions threatened food workers' well-being. COVID-19 has worsened these problems, leaving food workers vulnerable both to COVID-19 infection and adverse financial consequences. At the same time, the pandemic has made a wide cross-section of NYC residents appreciate how essential food workers are. This growing understanding could help build public support for policies and programs that ameliorate these problems. The City should encourage government, businesses, and labor unions to act now to capitalize on this opportunity.

Recommendations to Rebuild the Food System

In the coming years, NYC residents will need to decide how to use the pandemic to rebuild our food system. We end this report with a few suggestions for short term

actions that could begin this process. These recommendations are the beginning of a policy agenda to address the food system problems that the pandemic has highlighted.

New York City should:

- Strengthen and expand the Mayor's Office of Food Policy. The Office of Food Policy should exercise the same overarching, inter-agency power that the Food Czar team exercised. With clear authority, adequate funding, and staff who have deep understanding of food programs and policies, NYC could more nimbly respond to future crises.
- For users, create and maintain a public dataset of all food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency food resources that includes up-to-date information on openings, closings, and hours of operation. The City should provide simple technologies for emergency food providers to easily update their status.
- Expand economic stimulus support, focusing on small and independent food businesses that women, people of color, and immigrants own and operate.
- Monitor retail, institutional food, and emergency food programs impact on diet quality and address nutrition-related inequities which occur because of income and race.
- Develop food plans for future emergencies that include concrete steps to support high quality diets.
- Ensure that all local, state, and federal benefit programs for workers are accessible to all food workers, especially those with the lowest pay and least benefits.



Appendix: Methods

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Hunter College NYC FPC Interviews with NYC Residents During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In an effort to assess the individual and community-level impact of New York City's food system response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hunter College NYC FPC conducted interviews in the months of July and August with 13 individuals (9 women; 4 men) from several under-resourced and/or disproportionately affected communities throughout the City. The participants came from the Mott Haven/Melrose, Fordham/University Heights, Morrisania/Crotona, and Belmont neighborhoods in the South Bronx; the Elmhurst/Corona, Kew Gardens/Woodhaven neighborhoods in Queens; and the Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn.

The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 72 years; seven of them had an educational background of high school or less, while the remaining had a college or professional degree. Seven self-identified as Latinx/Hispanic; five Black/African-American, and one Pacific Islander. All but one participant lived with other family members (households ranging from two to nine occupants), and 10 participants (77%) reported their household was receiving SNAP benefits.

Participants answered questions related to the food security and food resources (e.g., delivery services, pantries, soup kitchens, DOE meal hubs, other community- and faith-based food access initiatives) they used during the months in lockdown. Questions explored whether or not they experienced changes to food access; their perception of the quality of foods received; and what problems, if any, they encountered at community-based sites and retail environments.

Hunter College NYC FPC Food Pantry Opening and Closing Data

To maintain the *Coronavirus NYC Neighborhood Food Resource Guides*, Hunter College NYC FPC volunteers made more than 30,000 calls to each food pantry/soup kitchen on a weekly basis. They collected information on status (open/closed/unknown), hours, and dietary accommodations (e.g., kosher, halal). This food pantry data was merged into a single dataset with information from other City and community-based sources including City Harvest, DSNY, FeedNYC, and Plentiful. Researchers used physical address as well as latitude and longitude coordinates to identify the Community District/Neighborhood for each food pantry and soup kitchen. The data was entered into an AirTable (online collaborative database software) form. Descriptive statistics were used to assess food pantry availability throughout the pandemic in the neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19, in comparison to respective boroughs and in NYC overall. Because there are multiple sources of data, measures were taken to identify and eliminate duplicates to provide accurate data regarding the availability of food pantries in these neighborhoods. It is important to note that additional food pantries may have been open, however, Hunter College NYC FPC data was only based on food pantries and soup kitchens that could be reached via phone calls to confirm pantry availability.

CUNY School of Public Health COVID-19 Tracking Survey

The CUNY School of Public Health COVID-19 Tracking Survey is conducting 16 surveys of a representative sample of 1,000 NYC residents from March to December 2020. The survey questions were developed by CUNY SPH faculty, and the poll was administered by Emerson College Polling. The survey sample derived from a random sample of

landline and mobile telephone numbers in a database provided by Aristotle, LLC, and an online sample from opt-in panels recruited by Mturk and SurveyMonkey. For the first six months, each survey sample represented a unique set of respondents at a given time. Not a single sample followed longitudinally. More information on the survey methodology and additional findings are posted on the CUNY SPH COVID-19 Tracking Survey website and methodology page. After reviewing this project, the CUNY IRB determined that the datasets from the polls did not meet criteria for human subjects research and did not require approval.

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute Food Retail Survey

The CUNY Institute Food Retail Survey was conducted over a 13-week period between March 24 and June 25, 2020. The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute solicited responses from New York residents across the five boroughs and in New York State in an environmental scan of food retail availability at their local retailers. Participants volunteered to complete an online form during or after grocery shopping to report on food availability and COVID-19-related social distancing protocols at local markets.

The survey received 318 responses from New York residents representing 115 unique neighborhoods (92 in New York City, 23 in Upstate New York and Long Island.) Using data collected in this survey, the Institute conducted a sub-analysis of NYC specific responses, (n=293), using the 2018 NYC median household income (\$60,782), and explored differences in reported food availability and respondent experiences between low-income (n=115, 39%) and high-income (n=178, 61%) neighborhoods. After reviewing this project, the CUNY IRB determined that the environmental scan survey did not meet criteria for human

subjects research and did not require approval.

Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy staff collaborated with a national research team to complete a case study of four of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. to understand the availability and accessibility of school meal sites by census tracts. We used Python code to download publicly available data (e.g., site name, address, hours of operation) from each district daily between April 14 and 18, 2020. Meal site locations were triangulated using district documentation (e.g., press releases).

For the spatial analyses, the team either transferred meal site locations from mapped datasets or processed address information with the Google Maps application programming interface (API) through the BatchGeo website and geocoded sites (mapped location from a physical address) to the highest level of positional accuracy possible.

To identify meal sites relative to high-poverty areas, racial minorities, and youth population (age 5–19), we used the American Community Survey, 2014–2018, 5-year estimates at the Census tract level. We extracted Census tract-level variables of “percent minority” (all non-White, including Latinx) and “percent poverty level” (income in the past 12 months below poverty level, divided by total households) and joined these data to census tract boundary map files. We extracted the total population of children ages 5–19 in each census tract and used school district boundary files to select only the census tracts that fell within the school district perimeter.

We joined the census sociodemographic data to the meal site location data and determined the number of meal sites per census tract. Finally, we used univariate statistics to determine the prevalence (count and proportion) of meal sites in census tracts above and below the median census tract measure for each characteristic described above (i.e., percent poverty, percent racial/ethnic minority, population 5–19 years of age).

The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy Survey of Food and Nutrition Education Organizations on the Impact of COVID-19

The Tisch Food Center conducted a survey to assess the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on NYC-based food and nutrition education organizations and their communities. We collected data from March 31 through April 9, 2020; 42 organizations responded. These organizations serve all five boroughs of New York and consist primarily of non-profit organizations.