

UNBOXING THE REALITY OF HUNGER

**Hidden Need, Threats & Resources of
NYC's Emergency Food Network**



Introduction

Nearly eight years after the end of the Great Recession, local unemployment and poverty rates are at or near pre-Recession levels.¹ The conventional wisdom holds that such conditions signal a lessening of need for emergency food, yet New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens continue to report high demand and chronic food shortages.²

Ending hunger in our city and country has always been a public-private partnership, with public policies offering a robust response – through such safety net mechanisms as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) and the federal child nutrition programs – and private charities filling in gaps where the public response is incomplete or insufficient. Emergency food providers are the resource of last resort; the need that they face is largely determined by the economic forces that draw people to – or pull them away from – the financial margins, as well as the strength of the safety net to prevent hunger.

Over the past year, the future of this public-private partnership has been thrown into doubt, as the role of government in ensuring Americans have access to basic living standards has seen repeated challenges. In February 2018, the White House offered a budget proposal that would impose a substantial, long-term cut to SNAP and convert it, at least partly, into a commodities distribution program. The net result would be a 30 percent reduction in the federal SNAP budget, alongside complete elimination of SNAP nutrition education funding and the Commodities Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides commodity food packages to seniors. In 2017, each House of Congress offered its own budget proposal to dramatically reduce spending in SNAP. If cuts to nutrition assistance programs are not achieved through the budget process, the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, slated for 2018, presents another potential threat. The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act creates the possibility of cuts in the future, as lawmakers seek to bring spending in line with reduced revenue.

This report, presented at a moment of contrasts – relative economic stability juxtaposed with political volatility – examines food insecurity in New York City and the operating resources available to our city's food pantries and soup kitchens.

While Food Insecurity Declines, Intensity of Food Need Increases

Food insecurity indicates a lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members, and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. In the United States, food insecurity is primarily a function of insufficient financial

¹ According to economists' definitions, the Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.

² See, for example, "Trade-Offs at the Dinner Table." Food Bank For New York City, 2017.

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resources for food. The **Meal Gap** represents food insecurity as a number of missing meals that result from insufficient household resources to purchase food.³

New York City had a Meal Gap of approximately 225 million in 2015 (the most recent year for which data is available), with 14.9 percent of residents categorized as food insecure.⁴ The food insecurity rate among New York City's children was even higher, with nearly one in five (20.4 percent, or approximately 365,000 children) experiencing food insecurity. Figure 1 shows New York City's Meal Gap at the community level.

Consistent with trends in poverty and unemployment, the number of food-insecure New York City residents has been in decline in recent years. Since 2009, the number of food-insecure New Yorkers has dropped by seven percent (as shown in Table 1).

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Food-insecure NYC residents (est.)	1,342,920	1,268,720	1,442,640	1,428,810	1,360,740	1,370,530	1,253,720
% change from prior year		-6%	14%	-1%	-5%	1%	-9%
% change from 2009		-6%	7%	6%	1%	2%	-7%

Table 1. Food Bank For New York City analysis of Map the Meal Gap data, 2009-2015.

While this trend would appear to be inconsistent with continued reports of elevated need at food pantries and soup kitchens, additional data from the Meal Gap analysis helps provide an explanation: the food budget shortfall of those struggling with food insecurity has increased by 29 percent, even as the number of food-insecure New York City residents has declined (see Table 2). This means that the financial resources of those experiencing food insecurity are increasingly insufficient to secure an adequate diet. These data suggest that emergency food providers have been seeing visitors with greater frequency than in times past.

³ Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, A. Crumbaugh, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2017: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Weekly food budget shortfall per food-insecure NYC resident	\$16.02	\$16.68	\$15.85	\$18.18	\$19.03	\$19.70	\$20.67
% change from prior year		4%	-5%	15%	5%	4%	5%
% change from 2009		4%	-1%	13%	19%	23%	29%

Table 2. Food Bank For New York City analysis of Map the Meal Gap data, 2009-2015.

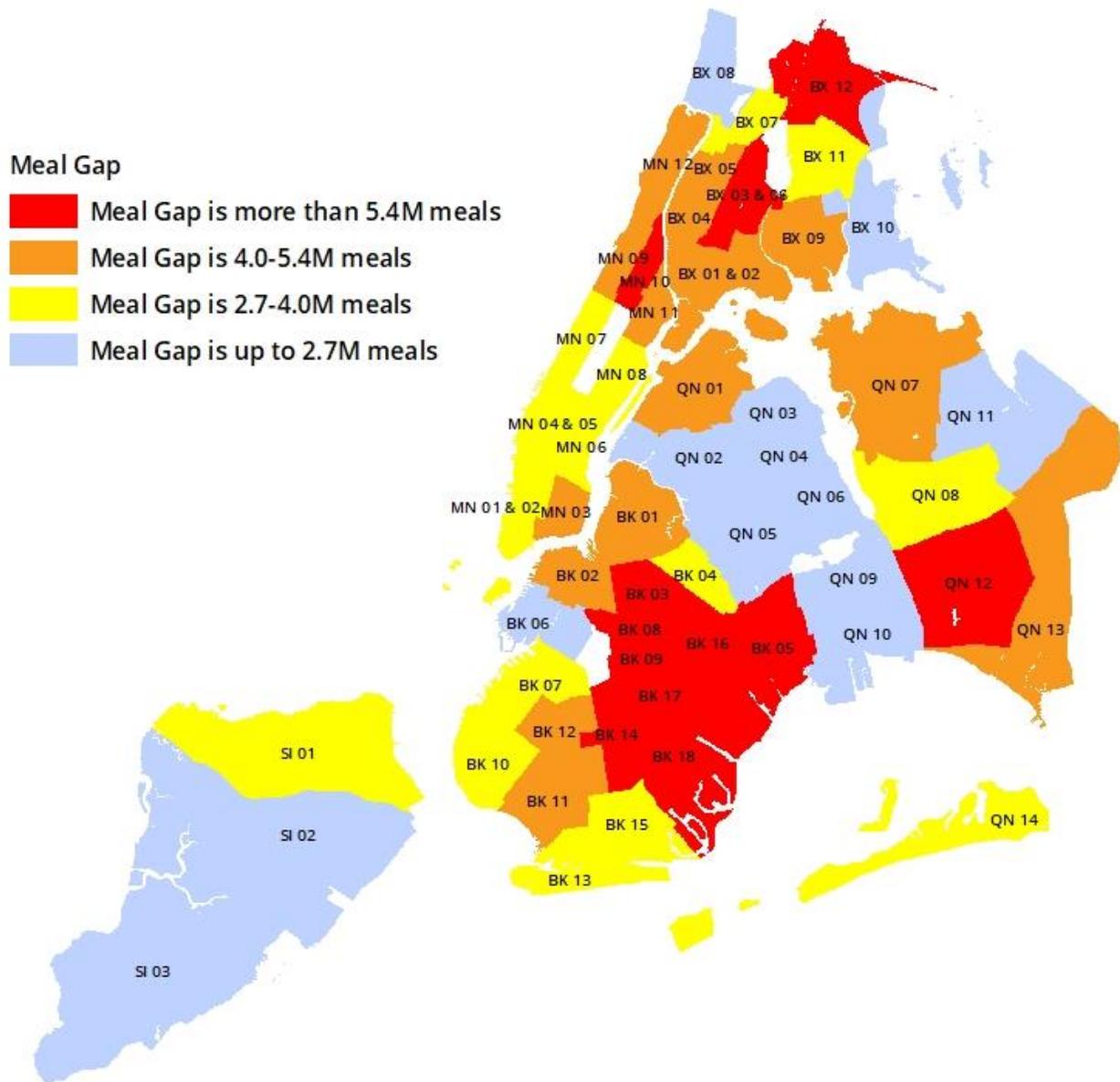


Figure 1. Source: Food Bank For New York City analysis based on Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, A. Crumbaugh, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2017: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2017.

A Network's Resources

Food Bank For New York City surveyed food pantries and soup kitchens in its network about their resources and needs in January 2018.

Budgets

- Median operating budget: **between \$25,000 and \$49,999**

Nearly half of food pantries and soup kitchens (44 percent) have an operating budget under \$25,000 per year, as shown in Figure 2 below.

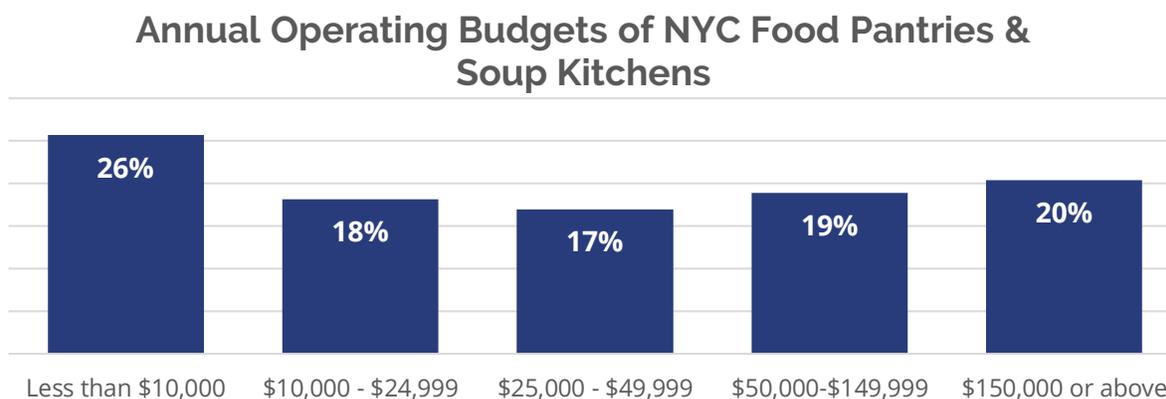


Figure 2

Paid staff remain minimal at the average food pantry or soup kitchen, which are likely to have several volunteers working in a full-time capacity.

- Average number of full-time paid staff at a food pantry or soup kitchen: **1**
- Average number of full-time volunteers at a food pantry or soup kitchen: **5**

Looking at the breakdown in Figure 3, the most common budgeted expense of food pantries and soup kitchens is food. The median food budget of a New York City food pantry or soup kitchen is \$12,123, with the mean at \$70,747. The least common budgeted expense is staff for non-food programs and services, meaning that at a given food pantry or soup kitchen, it is likely those programs or services are being offered by volunteers, if at all.

The ability of food pantries and soup kitchens to secure in-kind resources is key to operating on a lean budget that prioritizes food. It is worth noting, for example, that only about one in five (21 percent) emergency food providers pay rent for the space they occupy.

% of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Reporting Budgeted Expense

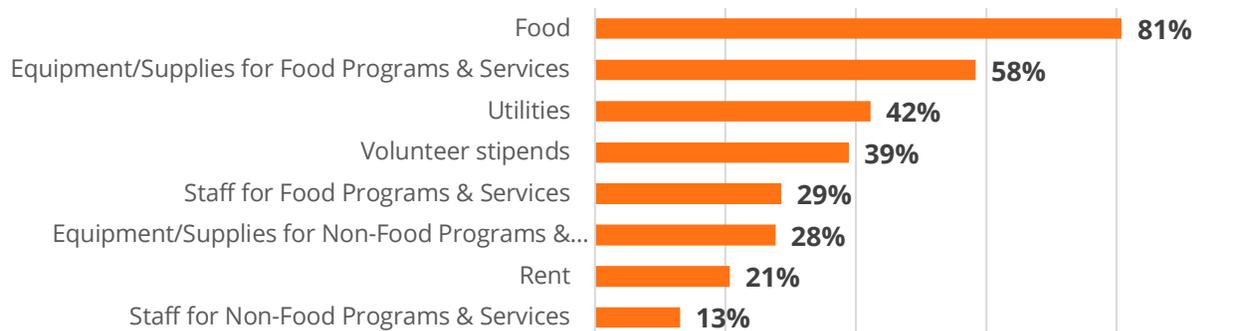


Figure 3.

On-Site Services

The availability of programs and services on-site is an important measure of food pantries' and soup kitchens' capacity. Where data were available, survey findings were compared to the responses from Food Bank For New York City's 2011-12 Hunger Safety Net Report, *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today*, to provide insight and context for how the availability of on-site programs and services within the network has changed over time.⁵ The findings are summarized in Table 3.

Highlights

- More than half of pantries and soup kitchens in the network provide information on nutrition (58 percent) and SNAP (53 percent). These are the most widely offered services.
- The most dramatic growth in programming has been in free tax assistance: the share of food pantries and soup kitchens offering document submission is *more than six times higher* in 2018 than it was in 2012.
- A growing share of food pantries and soup kitchens are offering on-site SNAP application assistance, though there has not been a significant change in the share of food pantries and soup kitchens providing information or referrals about SNAP.

In 2012, tax assistance services were not especially prevalent in the emergency food network: while 26 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens were providing tax-time information, no more than 10 percent were providing any kind of assistance on-site. Today, one in five (20 percent) are providing document submission, and nearly as many (17 percent) are providing tax assistance on-site.

⁵ *Serving under Stress, Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today*. Food Bank For New York City, 2012. The *Serving Under Stress* report presented data gathered from 83 percent of all food pantries and 85 percent of all soup kitchens in New York City at the time, making it more of a census of the network than a survey.

Information, Referral, or Assistance Provided On-Site	% of total	
	2012	2018
Nutrition Education		
Information on nutrition	56%	58%
Information/referral for nutrition education programs*	18%	32%
Nutrition education workshops*	27%	31%
One-on-one nutrition counseling*	20%	12%
SNAP		
SNAP Information	55%	53%
Referrals to SNAP services	49%	47%
Prescreening for SNAP eligibility	26%	25%
SNAP application assistance*	26%	31%
Submission of new SNAP applications*	7%	17%
Submission of SNAP application re-certifications*	8%	18%
SNAP client mediation	7%	10%
Free Tax Assistance		
Free tax assistance information*	26%	31%
Referrals to free tax assistance	28%	29%
Scanning/submission of tax documents, including virtual drop-off*	3%	20%
Tax assistance on-site*	10%	17%
Voluntary Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site*	3%	9%
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)		
TANF information*	27%	38%
TANF referrals*	26%	36%
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants & Children (WIC)		
WIC information*	20%	30%
WIC referrals	28%	27%
Child Nutrition Programs		
Information on the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)*	31%	40%
Information on the School Lunch Program*	19%	36%
Information on the School Breakfast Program*	19%	28%

Table 3. Note: statistically significant differences denoted with an asterisk.

The data tell a similar story about SNAP application assistance: in 2012, about one in four (26%) food pantries and soup kitchens were providing on-site application assistance, and less than 10 percent were able to submit new applications or re-certifications. Today, not only are more emergency food providers (31 percent) providing application assistance, there has been considerable growth in the proportion of food pantries and soup kitchens offering application and recertification submission services, 17 and 18 percent, respectively.

A Network Looks Ahead

Threats to Operations

Food pantries and soup kitchens were asked to rank selected factors on the threat to their operation, on a scale from “no threat at all” to “major threat.” Policy changes at all levels of government were identified as top threats, with federal, state and local policy changes constituting three of the top four “major threats.” Securing or maintaining funding was identified as the top non-policy threat. Figure 4 details food pantries’ and soup kitchens’ responses.

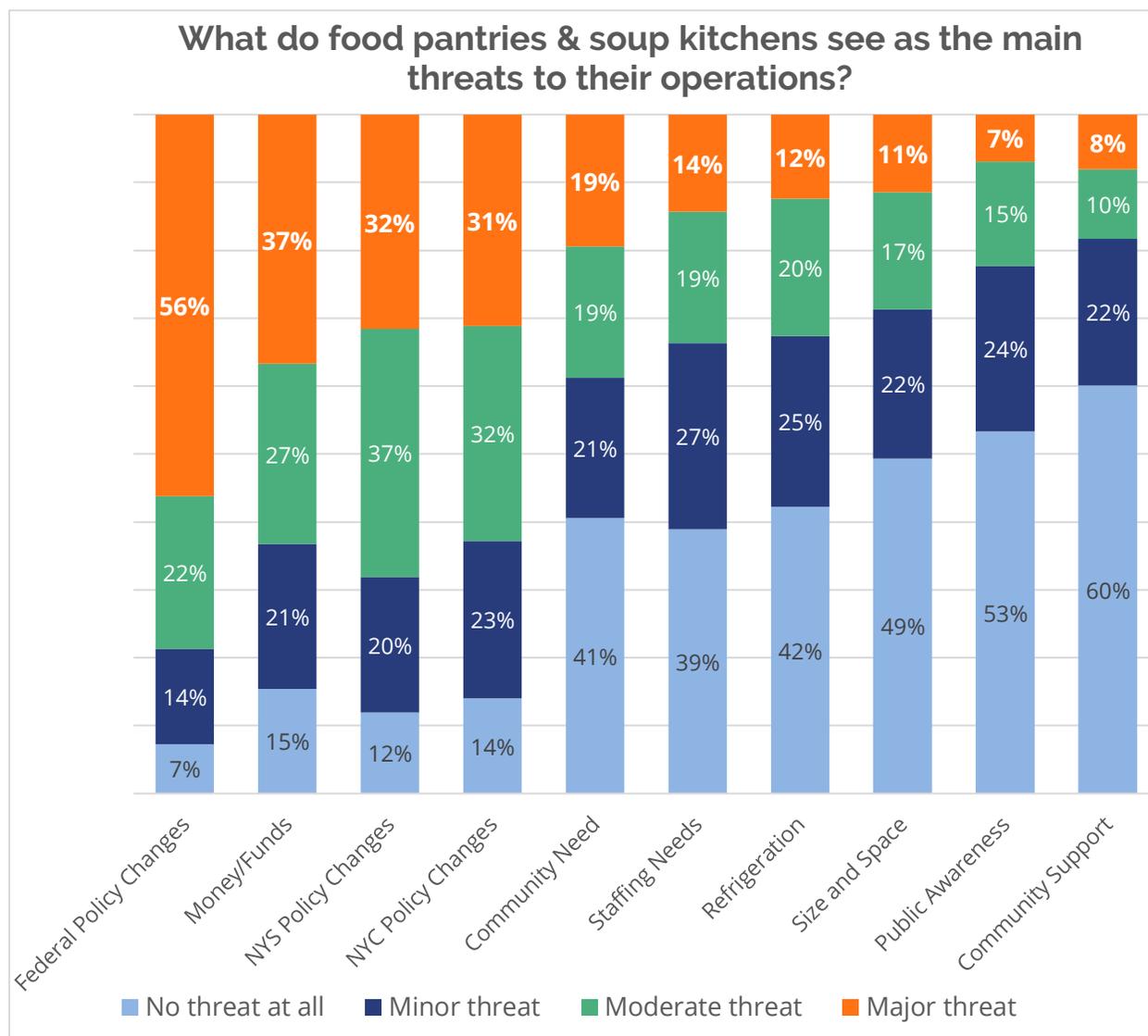


Figure 4.

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More than half (56 percent) of respondents indicated policy changes from the federal government represent a major threat to their operations; three in four (79 percent) respondents designated it as either a major or a moderate threat. More than two in three (69 percent) respondents indicated that policy changes from New York State government represented a major or moderate threat to sustaining their operations in 2018, and nearly two in three (63 percent) indicated that policy changes from New York City government were a major or moderate threat.

Nearly two in three (64 percent) respondents indicated that funding represented a major or moderate threat to sustaining their operations in 2018.

Confidence in the Future

Despite the increasingly uncertain political climate, the network remains confident in its ability to continue providing New Yorkers with needed services, with 91 percent of respondents indicating that they are either confident (27%) or very confident (64%) in their ability to continue operations in 2018.

When asked to compare their confidence level to this time in 2017, 31 percent felt more confident for 2018, but the majority, 62 percent, felt the same level of confidence in 2018 as in 2017.

- **6%** felt less confident than last year.
- **62%** felt the same level of confidence as last year
- **32%** felt more confidence than last year.

Priorities for 2018

Asked to rank their 2018 priorities among eight options (see Table 5), the largest number of food pantries and soup kitchens (26 percent) indicated that increasing the amount of food distributed and/or meals served is their highest priority in 2018. More than one in five (22 percent) indicated that their top goal was to increase the number of people served. The three goals most often ranked first were related to the amount of food distributed and its quality, indicating that service delivery is the top priority of the emergency food network at a time when need remains elevated and safety net programs, SNAP in particular, are under threat.

Goal	% Indicating Top Priority
Increase amount of food distributed/meals served	26%
Increase number of people served	22%
Increase nutritional quality of food distributed	20%
Target underserved populations	15%
Add new programs/services	13%
Do more fundraising	13%
Expand physical capacity	9%
Recruit more volunteers	5%

Table 4.

Conclusions

At a time of relative economic stability, we are seeing New Yorkers who continue to struggle with food insecurity falling further and further behind. At the same time, we have seen federal budget proposals target SNAP for deep cuts. The most recent of these, the Fiscal Year 2019 White House budget, reduces SNAP’s overall budget by 30 percent. Given that 93 percent of federal SNAP spending is for food, a cut of this size would necessitate a reduction in household allotments, participation, or both – increasing hunger and hardship among low-income Americans. This budget comes on the heels of budget proposals from both houses of Congress proposing draconian long-term SNAP cuts themselves. The upcoming 2018 Farm Bill, which sets funding and policy for the country’s food, farm, hunger and nutrition programs every five years, could be used as another legislative vehicle for damaging proposals.

New York City’s network of food pantries and soup kitchens is wary of the decisions policymakers can make from the comfortable distances of Washington, DC, Albany, NY or City Hall that affect the ability of New Yorkers to put needed food on the table. Across-the-board SNAP cuts implemented in November 2013 coincided with an immediate and widespread increase in visitor traffic to food pantries and soup kitchens across the city. More recent changes to the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) reduced the number of service providers in the five boroughs, redistributing resources in ways that could have implications for certain communities or vulnerable populations. The Mayor’s Preliminary Budget once again claws back funding increases for the City’s Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) – a \$7.3 million reduction in funding for emergency food, amounting to a potential loss of 6.8 million meals – even as operational changes have made allocation determinations more transparent to participating food pantries and soup kitchens.

Resilient as ever, the leaders of our city's food pantries and soup kitchens nevertheless feel confident in their ability to serve, and they have shown, over time, that they are both willing and able to do more. The increases in SNAP and tax programming seen since 2012 are in part the result of an intentional strategy to ensure that the presence of food pantries and soup kitchens in the lives of 1.4 million New York City residents can offer them more than the meal they need tonight, or food at home for tomorrow – that it strengthens and empowers them with sustainable supports that lessen the reliance on emergency food. This finding is further evidence that focused capacity investments in the emergency food network can yield expanded access to vital anti-hunger and anti-poverty resources throughout the city.

Methodology

To generate survey findings, an online survey was sent to all active food pantries and soup kitchens for which Food Bank For New York City had an email contact (a total of 725). The survey responses were collected in January 2017.

After rejection of duplicated and incomplete responses, a total of 331 completed surveys from 268 food pantries and 63 soup kitchens (proportionate to the composition of Food Bank's membership) made up the sample for analysis. Unless otherwise noted, the confidence interval for all reported survey results, at the 95 percent level, is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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ABOUT FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

For 35 years, **Food Bank For New York City** has been the city's major hunger-relief organization working to end hunger throughout the five boroughs. Nearly one in five New Yorkers relies on Food Bank for food and other resources. Food Bank takes a strategic, multifaceted approach that provides meals and builds capacity in the neediest communities, while raising awareness and engagement among all New Yorkers. Through its network of more than 1,000 charities and schools citywide, Food Bank provides food for approximately 62 million free meals for New Yorkers in need. Food Bank For New York City's income support services, including food stamps (also known as SNAP) and free tax assistance for the working poor, put more than \$110 million each year into the pockets of New Yorkers, helping them to afford food and achieve greater dignity and independence. Food Bank's nutrition education programs and services empower more than 50,000 children, teens and adults to sustain a healthy diet on a limited budget. Working toward long-term solutions to food poverty, Food Bank develops policy and conducts research to inform community and government efforts.



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