

Food Insecurity and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on food access for New Yorkers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1.4 million New Yorkers relied on food pantries and soup kitchens¹ and 1.2 million were food insecure.² Communities of Black and Latino/a New Yorkers, which have been impacted by structural racism (racial bias across institutions and society that benefit White people and disadvantage people of color), are disproportionately affected by food insecurity and health conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.^{3,4} Closures of schools, child care programs, senior centers and other government-run programs and emergency food programs have worsened barriers to food access. Many local food pantries have closed during the COVID-19 pandemic because of food shortages and a lack of volunteers.⁵ Those that remained open have struggled to meet the increased demand for food.⁶ The Food Bank For New York City (NYC) has indicated that 74% of food pantries and soup kitchens are seeing an increase in the overall number of visitors compared to last year.⁷

Disruption to the economy and reduced mobility have created new barriers to accessing food in NYC. Unemployment has increased in the city, with 1 million more initial unemployment claims filed between March 21 and June 6, 2020 than were filed in the same time period in 2019.⁸ The movements of NYC residents have also been restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, worsening food access issues, particularly for those with low incomes or at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. These challenges increase the risk of food insecurity for many New Yorkers, including but not limited to those who would normally rely on government and emergency food programs.

Food insecurity can be associated with poor diet and has been linked to other factors that can be detrimental to health, such as delaying medical care or having to choose between buying

¹ Quets G, Spota A, Stampas T, Kidane Z. Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City. Food Bank For New York City website.

² Food Bank For New York City analysis based on Gundersen C, Dewey A, Kato M, Crumbaugh A, Strayer M. Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017. Feeding America. Published 2019. Accessed July 23, 2020.

³ Social Determinants of Health Survey. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Published 2017. Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁴ Community Health Survey. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Published 2017. Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁵ Bocanegra M. Big names in emergency food network divide city's \$25M. Politico website. <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2020/04/21/big-names-in-emergency-food-network-divide-citys-25-million-1278837>. Published April 21, 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁶ Biron B. New York City food pantries declare a state of emergency as demand soars, while thousands of gallons of milk and tons of produce are dumped nationwide. Business Insider website. <https://www.businessinsider.com/new-york-city-food-pantries-declare-state-of-emergency-2020-4>. Published April 14, 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁷ Fighting More Than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic. Food Bank For New York. Published 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁸ Per data calculated by the NYC Health Department from weekly New York State Department of Labor statistics. <https://labor.ny.gov/stats/>.

food and paying for other necessities. Since March 2020, the City has instituted important programs to support New Yorkers in obtaining food for themselves and their families during the COVID-19 emergency. These programs include providing emergency food deliveries to populations vulnerable to COVID-19, who are unable to leave their homes or afford daily deliveries of meals; supporting the City's emergency food network to make sure food providers who are able to operate during the pandemic can keep up with the increase in demand; and distributing emergency food for pickup at locations across the city as a key measure to address the dramatic and abrupt reduction in emergency food locations. Also, the City has promoted city, state and federal food resources and benefits available to all New Yorkers.

These programs are important in helping to meet the food access needs of New Yorkers.

Key Actions to Prevent COVID-19 Transmission

As COVID-19 continues to spread in our communities, all City agencies should promote the following actions to program staff, volunteers and participants:

- **Stay home if you feel sick:** Staff, volunteers and program participants should stay home if they are sick.
- **Keep physical distance:** Staff, volunteers and program participants should stay at least 6 feet away from other people to the greatest extent possible. If unable to maintain 6 feet, everyone must wear a face covering if over the age of 2 and medically able to do so.
- **Wear a face covering:** Staff, volunteers and program participants should protect those around them by wearing a face covering any time they may come within 6 feet of others. A person can be contagious without symptoms and spread the disease when coughing, sneezing or talking. Face coverings help reduce the spread of COVID-19. All volunteers and staff at the sites must wear face coverings and must be provided a face covering if they cannot get their own. All visitors at the sites must wear a face covering unless they are under the age of 2 or are medically unable to do so. For more information, visit nyc.gov/facecoverings.
- **Practice healthy hand hygiene:** Staff, volunteers and program participants should frequently wash their hands with soap and water (for at least 20 seconds) or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available; clean frequently touched surfaces regularly; avoid touching their face with unwashed hands; and cover their cough or sneeze with their arm (not their hands). Hand hygiene should be promoted through signage on-site.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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