



Attitudes Towards Hunger in New York City: How New Yorkers View Hunger

Summary Report

**Prepared by
Food Bank For New York City
Government Relations, Policy & Research Division**

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About Food Bank For New York City

The mission of the Food Bank For New York City is to end hunger by organizing food, information and support for community survival and dignity. As the city's largest hunger-relief organization, the Food Bank collects, warehouses and distributes food to more than 1,000 nonprofit community food programs throughout the five boroughs. The organization also offers ongoing support to its network of food programs through nutrition and food safety workshops, networking sessions and education tools that help build capacity and improve efficiency. The Food Bank serves as a resource center for member agencies, legislators, the media and the public.

The Food Bank's Government Relations, Policy & Research division regularly conducts research to ascertain trends regarding the degree of hunger throughout the city, socio-demographic profiles of programs and clients, changes in demand for food assistance and community needs assessments.

A member of America's Second Harvest and the largest food bank in the country, the Food Bank provides 61 million pounds of food annually to more than 1,000 community food programs citywide including soup kitchens, food pantries, and shelters. The food provided enables programs to serve more than 200,000 meals each day to individuals and families seeking emergency food assistance to avoid going hungry.

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Certified Member of America's Second Harvest

Introduction

An integral part of the Food Bank For New York City's mission is to work towards eradicating hunger by collecting and organizing information that can be used to address gaps in research, particularly within the areas that affect our constituents. In line with the Food Bank's mission, we have undertaken this study to determine New Yorkers' attitudes towards hunger. This study was aimed at answering the following questions: (1) Are New York City residents aware that hunger is a problem and has this sentiment increased within recent years? (2) Are working New Yorkers finding it difficult to afford to purchase food for their families? And, most importantly, (3) Are the people most in need of food resources knowledgeable of where to find them? Our primary goal was to determine if the need for emergency food assistance had increased in the recent years, and if so, whether people knew how to locate a nearby emergency food program.

Summary of Findings

The survey administered to gather the data for this study was developed by the Food Bank For New York City in conjunction with Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. Phone interviews were carried out throughout August 2003. The randomly selected sample of New York City residents was comprised of 937 adults 18 years or older in the five boroughs. The following are the key findings of the study.

New Yorkers are VERY aware that hunger is an issue in New York City.

- Overall, 82% of residents in New York City believe hunger is a problem.
- Within each borough, more than 75% of residents responded hunger was either a major problem or somewhat of a problem.
- In terms of race, 91% of New York City African-Americans believe hunger is a problem, closely followed by White (83%) and Latino (81%) residents.

The economic decline of the past three years has impacted ALL New Yorkers.

- Over 60% of New Yorkers, at ALL income levels, believe it has become increasingly difficult for families to afford to feed themselves over the past three years.
- This is the same across race, where over 60% of White, African-American, and Latino respondents found affording food within the last three years increasingly difficult.

Households within the lower income brackets, families with children, and Latinos would be hardest hit by unemployment.

- Immediately within the first month of losing their job, 30% of all households making \$25,000 or less would not be able to afford to buy food. This number would rise to 66% within the following 6 months. This is very problematic since average per capita income for boroughs such as the Bronx and Brooklyn is reported at less than \$25,000 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2002).
- Almost 50% of households with children would not be able to afford to buy food within the first three months of losing their job.
- Over half of Latinos (53%) would not be able to feed their families within the first three months of losing their job, increasing to 67% within six months of unemployment. Latinos are also the group the Census Bureau reports has been hardest hit by the economic conditions of the recent years (*The New York Times*, 2003).

Within the last year, Latinos and households making less than \$25,000 could not afford to eat.

- Almost half of all households making \$25,000 or less could not afford to purchase food within the last year (49%). Shockingly, 22% of households

in this income bracket responded that buying food was so difficult, there were times during the year that they did not purchase food at all.

- While both African-Americans and Latinos experienced the decline in the economy throughout the past year, 47% of Latinos responded that there was a time during the past year when they could not afford to purchase food, this is in comparison to 32% of the African-American community.

While New Yorkers are familiar with food programs, they do not know where to access food within their own neighborhoods. Further, knowledge of local food resources is low amongst the groups who need it the most.

- Less than 4 out of 10 New Yorkers are knowledgeable of a food program within their community (38%). This is the same for households with children.
- Although 87% of respondents in both boroughs remarked that hunger was a problem in New York City, only 24% of residents in Staten Island and 35% of residents in the Bronx are aware of a local food program.
- Even though 86% of women reported that hunger was a problem, only 4 out of 10 know of a local food program (40%).
- While 85% of Latinos would not be able to afford food after six months of unemployment, as many as 59% do NOT know where to access an emergency food provider in their vicinity.
- An astounding 64% of African-Americans reported that hunger was a problem (91%), and within this group, more than half also indicated that it was a MAJOR problem (57%).

Conclusions: What Have We Learned?

The study was undertaken to determine attitudes towards hunger; and if the need for emergency food assistance had increased in the recent years, and if so, whether people knew how to locate a nearby program. The survey results were broken down and analyzed by Borough, Age, Gender, Race, Income and Education Level. The following provides a synopsis of what we have learned through this endeavor. We suggest that the reader review the report in its entirety for a more comprehensive explanation.

Are New York City residents aware that hunger is a problem?

Our results show that affording food since 1994 has become increasingly difficult in New York City, and has risen from 19% to 25%, an increase of 6%. This justifies why 82% of all New Yorkers responded that they perceive hunger to be either a problem or a major problem in New York City. Surprisingly, the same trend is evident when the data is disaggregated according to demographic categories. For example, more than 75% of the respondents within each borough, across household income ranges of \$25,000 to over \$75,000, regardless of education level, racial categories, age, and gender concurred that hunger was indeed a problem. This points us to the deduction that not only are residents experiencing hardship, but are also unsure about their abilities to provide for their families within this economy.

Has this sentiment increased within the recent years?

Our findings reveal that within the last three years, New Yorkers have increasingly become more sensitive to issues of hunger and poverty with over 60% of respondents agreeing that they perceive that hunger has increased over the past three years. While this can be correlated to the residual effects of 9/11 (See Food Bank For New York City (2002) *Changes in Demand for Food Assistance at New York City Emergency Food Programs after September 11, 2001*), this is also a response to the declining economy, drop in median income,

increase in health care costs and number of unemployed individuals. Additionally, this trend is consistent amongst all of the demographic categories we looked at except education level where the percentage of respondents who replied that hunger had increased over the past few years ranged from 31-45%. While still significant, this may be indicative of a weak correlation between education and food security. However, further research would need to be conducted since we did not inquire about the actual level of education such as whether the respondent was a high school graduate or, had attained any schooling post-college level.

Are working New Yorkers finding it difficult to afford to purchase food for their families?

Overall, as many as 25% of New Yorkers had difficulty affording to purchase food in the past year with a shocking 11% of households with children reporting that they did not have enough to purchase food at all. Here is where the data begins to deviate within demographic categories. For instance, as many as 37% of folks in the Bronx found it harder to pay their monthly bills AND feed their families, this is 12% greater than in Brooklyn where the percentage, like the general figure for all of New York City, was 25%. Further, almost half of the households (49%) making \$25,000 or less (more than \$18,000 less than the average household income for New York State), reported that they had difficulty affording food. This is 28% greater than the difficulty encountered by the next hardest struck income range which fell between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (21%). By race and ethnicity, Latinos led the way at 47% encountering difficulty (34% greater than whites (13%), and 15% greater than African-Americans (32%)). The breakdown by education and gender ranged from 22% to 25%, which was similar to the overall difficulty New Yorkers had in general. Clearly, while education and gender remain significant, race and ethnicity, income and borough are by the far the most significant variables to food security, regardless of employment status.

Are the people most in need of food resources knowledgeable of where to find them?

Further, not only are residents finding it more difficult to purchase food after paying their monthly bills and expenses, but our findings also show that those that are most in need do not know where to access emergency food locally.

Overall, knowledge of food resources were determined in primarily two ways; how familiar residents were with general programs and how familiar they were with local programs. A third question that respondents were asked is how familiar they were with individuals who had used an emergency food program. Originally, this question was asked to determine whether there was a direct correlation between food insecurity and familiarity with emergency program visitors. It then became clear that responses to this question would be inaccurate since there could be many reasons why respondents might answer yes or no and thus, while it is evident that a correlation exists, without further research we cannot conclude what that relationship is.

However, all across the board, we found that knowledge of food resources were at a terrible low amongst all New Yorkers, regardless of demographic categories. Knowledge of local programs was at the lowest amongst those same groups that responded that they had encountered the greatest amount of difficulty meeting the food requirements for their household. Further, the results of our study clearly indicates the importance of accessing a local food provider during our current economic environment and also reinforces the need for the Food Bank's 24-hour, toll free phone service, 866-NYC-FOOD.

Where do we go from here?

The research findings of this study not only reinforces what we already know through other social indicators such as level of food stamp participation, employment rates, and poverty levels among others, but also emphasizes the need to take a closer look at the areas and demographic categories most

susceptible to an increase in demand for emergency food assistance. The results also highlight the need to analyze more closely the relationship between food insecurity in New York City and certain demographic categories such as education level and familiarity with a visitor of a food pantry or soup kitchen.

Further, the findings in this report will be used by the Food Bank For New York City to guide a more in-depth analysis of the gaps in emergency food services. This follow-up study to the Food Bank's earlier mapping projects will be aimed at analyzing the gaps in services and demand for emergency food.

We would like to conclude by noting that while this study hopes to have answered a few of the questions lingering within the emergency food community, we acknowledge that there are many ways to interpret data and that often our search for answers leads to further questions. Thus, we welcome any comments, suggestions, feedback or requests for more information.

For more information about the study, please contact:

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