

STILL SCALING THE HUNGER CLIFF: Need at NYC Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens



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ABOUT FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

Food Bank For New York City has been the city's major hunger-relief organization working to end hunger throughout the five boroughs for more than 30 years. 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 62.5 million free meals per year 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 \$150 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 and active lifestyle on a low budget. Working toward long-term solutions to food poverty, Food Bank develops policy and conducts research to inform community and government efforts. To learn more about how you can help, please visit foodbanknyc.org.

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INTRODUCTION

After a recession that upended the nation's economy, an unprecedented across-the-board benefit reduction for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) took effect in November 2013. The combination of the lingering effects of the Great Recession and this "Hunger Cliff" delivered a potent one-two punch for vulnerable individuals and families struggling to afford food. Food pantries and soup kitchens across New York City reported an immediate and widespread increase in visitor traffic.

Among the interventions that align to prevent hunger in America, food pantries and soup kitchens are considered the last line of defense. This network of emergency food providers, heavily dependent on charitable donations and volunteer labor, is particularly vulnerable to economic shifts or policy changes that drive low-income Americans to seek food assistance.

As new leadership prepares to take the reins of federal government, SNAP has yet to be restored to pre-Hunger Cliff levels; household benefits today are still lower than they were throughout most of 2013. This research brief offers a snapshot of the changes in demand at food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City since that moment, and it presents evidence that suggests recent state and local interventions may be creating improvements for New Yorkers who need emergency food to survive.

BACKGROUND: THE HUNGER CLIFF

The Hunger Cliff was the result of a legislative tradeoff enacted as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010; this unprecedented, across-the-board SNAP benefit cut was used to pay for a six-cents-per-meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements.¹ For more than one million New York City households,² it resulted in the immediate loss, on average, of nearly \$18 per month in benefits, and it affected individuals and families alike: at the time, more than one in three SNAP households in New York State had children (35 percent), and more than one in four included an elderly individual (28 percent).³

For New York City, the Hunger Cliff has amounted to a cut of more than \$540 million in lost benefits that could have been used to purchase food. This equates to **a loss of more than 161 million meals in New York City since November 2013.**

Food-insecure New Yorkers across the city were already facing an annual shortfall of 241 million meals in 2013.⁴ Emergency food providers, like food pantries and soup kitchens, work to fill this meal gap, but existing resources are insufficient, falling short by more than 100 million meals.⁵ When the SNAP cuts took effect, food pantries and soup kitchens reported an immediate and widespread increase in need, and they have seen both elevated demand and food shortages continue in subsequent years.⁶

1 Public Law 111-296.

2 Food Bank For New York City analysis of reported SNAP participation and benefit data by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the New York City Human Resources Administration.

3 *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. United States Department of Agriculture. December 2014.

4 Gundersen, C., A. Sato, A. Dewey, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2015: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2015.

5 Food Bank For New York City analysis.

6 See: "Visitor Traffic Increases at Emergency Food Providers Post-SNAP Cuts." Food Bank For New York City, 2014; "The Hunger Cliff One Year Later." Food Bank For New York City, 2014; and "Hunger Cliff NYC: Bridging a City's Monthly 5.3 Million Meal Loss." Food Bank For New York City, 2015.

SURVEY FINDINGS

To provide insight into how need at emergency food providers has changed since the Hunger Cliff, food pantries and soup kitchens were surveyed about the visitor traffic they experienced in September 2016, as compared to September 2013, before SNAP cuts took effect. These findings are presented here, and compared to findings of similar surveys in September 2015, September 2014 and November 2013.

Approximately four out of five (79 percent) food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed continued to report an increase in the number of visitors in September 2016, relative to September 2013 (as shown in Figure 1).

While this is a significant drop from the 90 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting increases in visitor traffic in September of 2015, it is comparable to the percentages of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting increases in visitor traffic in November 2013, as compared to the immediately preceding months (September/October 2013); and in September 2014, as compared to September 2013.

Nearly half (49 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had run out of food, or particular types of food, needed to make adequate meals or pantry bags in September 2016 (as shown in Figure 2).

While comparable to the percentages of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting food shortages in September 2015 and November 2013, this is significantly lower – by 11 percentage points – than the percentage of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting food shortages in September 2014 (60 percent).

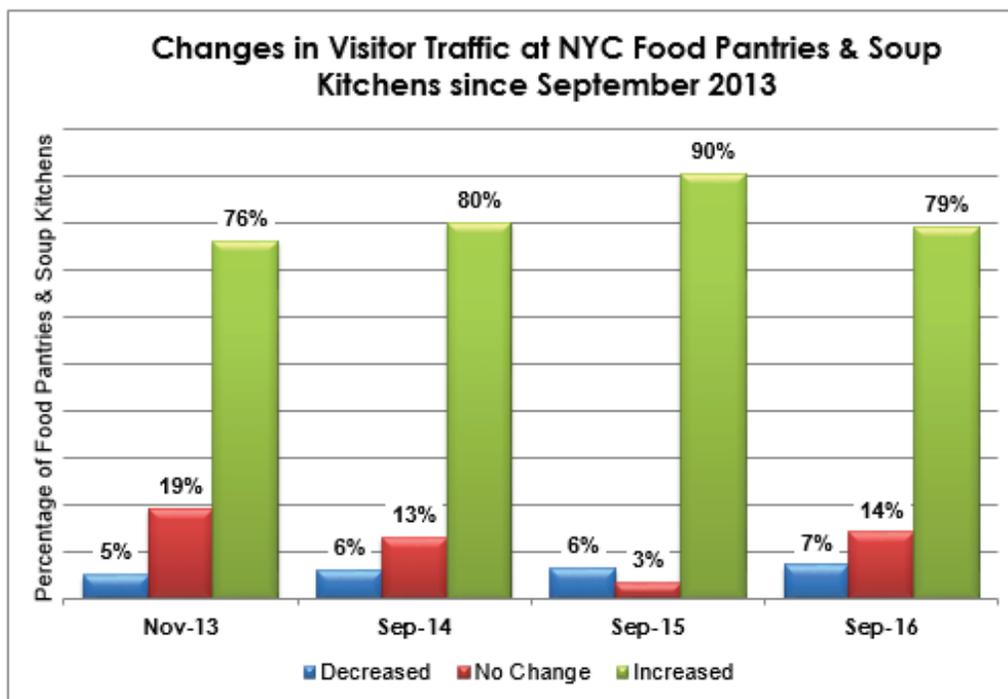


Figure 1. Note that in November 2013, food pantries and soup kitchens were asked to compare their visitor traffic to September or October of 2013; comparisons between these findings and those from September 2014 and September 2015 are therefore not exact.

More than two in five (42 percent) food pantries reported reducing the number of meals in their pantry bags during the month of September 2016 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food (as shown in Figure 2).

This is an increase of 19 percentage points from the 23 percent of food pantries that reported reducing the amount of food in their pantry bags during the month of November 2013. However, this reported percentage continues a downward trend from last year and is significantly lower – a decrease of 19 percentage points – than the highest reported percentage of food pantries reducing the amount of food in their pantry bags, which was during the month of September 2014 (61 percent).

Nearly three in ten (29 percent) food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had turned people away during the month of September 2016 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food required to make adequate meals or pantry bags (as shown in Figure 2).

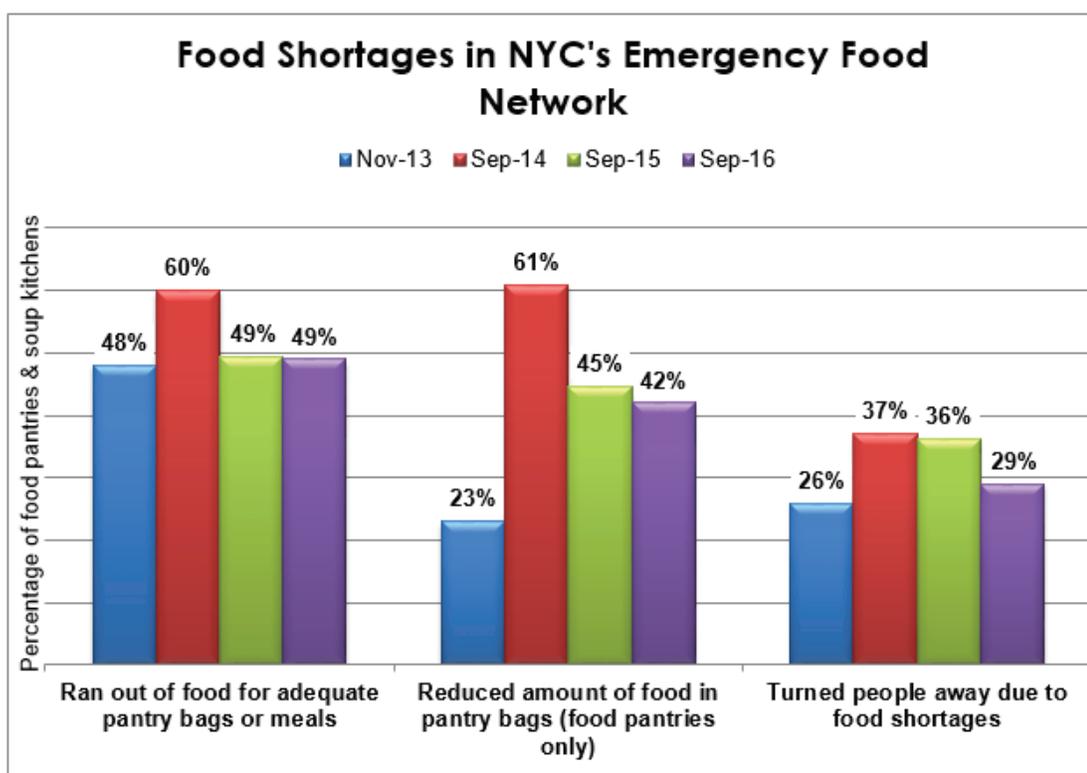


Figure 2.

This is a significant decrease from the levels reported in September 2014 and September 2015 (37 and 36 percent, respectively), and comparable to the 26 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that reported turning people away due to food shortages during the month of November 2013.

CONCLUSIONS

After nearly three years since the November 2013 cuts to SNAP, survey findings reveal that visitor traffic at food pantries and soup kitchens remains at elevated levels. While the data do not identify the cause, the November 2013 SNAP cuts continue to represent the biggest systemic factor reducing the food purchasing power of low-income people.⁷ In addition, food shortages at food pantries and soup kitchens remain far too common, with nearly half reporting running out of food in the course of a single month.

Yet the number of food pantries and soup kitchens experiencing these food shortages – and food rationing in response to shortages – is comparable to what was seen in September 2015 and may even be on the decline. Significantly, the percentage of food pantries and soup kitchens having to turn people away – a last-resort measure when skimping or rationing is no longer possible – did decline. A key contextual factor noted last year (September 2015) was that significant additional resources had entered the emergency food supply as a last allocation of New York State's federal Sandy recovery funding⁸; it is notable at this moment that substantial increases were secured in the past year for two significant government sources of emergency food: the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), and the New York City Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Great Recession and the Hunger Cliff acted as systemic shocks to the emergency food system; as these findings show, the aftereffects of those shocks endure to this day. The food pantries and soup kitchens that act as the last line of defense against hunger have continued to experience sustained, increased need for emergency food since SNAP benefits were cut – a phenomenon that underscores the interconnectedness of SNAP and emergency food as survival strategies for New Yorkers who struggle to put food on the table.

This report offers evidence that food pantries and soup kitchens are able to serve vulnerable New Yorkers in meaningfully better ways – with fewer food shortages and fuller pantry bags – when needed resources are in place. The baseline increase for HPNAP and the one-time increase for EFAP enacted in the state and city 2016-17 budgets (respectively) are important investments in our city's ability to ensure that every New Yorker has adequate, nutritious food to survive and thrive. While more is needed to catch up to rising food costs and increased need, there should be little doubt that additional investment is both necessary and worthwhile.

Despite a seven-year trend of general economic recovery and growth, rates of food insecurity in New York City and across the country remain persistently high.⁹ Should the coming Congressional session bring efforts to cut SNAP – our nation's first line of defense against hunger – or other vital safety net programs, there is little doubt that further benefit reductions or restrictions on access will increase New Yorkers' reliance on food pantries and soup kitchens.

7 For example, local unemployment, a highly influential factor in seeking food assistance, has been in steady decline in New York City since then.

8 "Hunger Cliff NYC: Bridging a City's Monthly 5.3 Million Meal Loss." Food Bank For New York City, 2015.

9 Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2015*, ERR-215. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2016. Food security is defined as access by all people, at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

While strengthening the emergency food system is necessary, it cannot take the place of a government safety net: SNAP provides New Yorkers more meals in two months than the city's entire emergency food network supplies in a year. The average food pantry in New York City operates with a single paid staff member -- many have none at all -- and an annual budget of less than \$25,000¹⁰. While this network has the resilience, resourcefulness and commitment to stretch scant resources to serve 1.4 million New York City residents, charity is not a substitute for strong public policy and investment in anti-hunger programs.

METHODOLOGY

The calculation of meals lost due to the Hunger Cliff SNAP cuts represents the difference, in meals, of average household SNAP benefits in New York City both before November 2013 and since, for the city's SNAP participants since the cuts.¹¹ The average cost of a meal in New York City is \$3.38.¹²

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 799). The survey responses were collected in October 2016.

After rejection of duplicated and incomplete responses, a total of 429 completed surveys (representing 54 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens) were randomly selected for analysis, in proportion with the composition of Food Bank's agency network as follows: 343 food pantries (80 percent of the sample) and 86 soup kitchens (20 percent of the sample). The confidence interval for survey results, at the 95 percent level, is plus or minus 3.2 percentage points.

10 "Abundant in Heart, Short on Resources: Need and Opportunity at NYC Food Pantries." Food Bank For New York City, 2016.

11 Monthly SNAP participation and benefit data is reported by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The analysis excluded months in which non-recurring benefit issuances, such as Disaster SNAP benefits after Super Storm Sandy, would skew the average.

12 Gundersen, C., A. Satoh, A. Dewey, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2015: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2015.

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