

HUNGER CLIFF NYC: BRIDGING A CITY'S MONTHLY 5.3 MILLION MEAL LOSS



Photo: Joey O'Loughlin

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Food Bank For New York City thanks its members for the time and effort they devoted to participate in this research.

PREPARED BY

William Guillaume Koible, Research Coordinator

Triada Stampas, Vice President for Research and Public Affairs

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 more than 64 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 \$150 million each year into the pockets of New Yorkers, helping them to afford food and achieve greater dignity and independence. In addition, Food Bank's nutrition education programs and services empower more than 275,000 children, teens and adults to sustain a healthy diet on a low budget. Learn how you can help at foodbanknyc.org.



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Introduction

On November 1, 2013, a date now known as the “Hunger Cliff,” an unprecedented across-the-board benefit reduction for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) took effect. As every one of New York City’s 1.8 million SNAP recipients found themselves with less money for food, food pantries and soup kitchens across the city – the last resort for New Yorkers at risk of hunger – reported an immediate and widespread increase in visitor traffic. Nearly one year later, with more than 56 million meals in New York City lost to SNAP cuts, a survey of food pantries and soup kitchens found that need at emergency food sites had not abated, even though other factors that meaningfully affect emergency food program participation, like local unemployment, had improved.

Nearly two years since, what, if anything, has changed? SNAP has yet to be restored to pre-Hunger Cliff levels; New Yorkers who rely on SNAP continue to receive less in benefits today than they would have for most of 2013. This research brief offers a snapshot of the longer-term changes in demand at food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City, and it presents evidence that suggests recent short-term interventions may have created improvements – even if temporary – for New Yorkers who need emergency food to survive.

The Hunger Cliff

The Hunger Cliff resulted in the immediate loss, on average, of nearly \$18 per month in benefits for more than one million New York City households. These sweeping cuts were the result of a legislative tradeoff passed by Congress and signed into law by the President: the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, passed in December 2010, scheduled SNAP benefit cuts nearly three years later in order to pay for a six-cents-per-meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements. While President Obama pledged to work with Congress to reverse the scheduled cut before it took effect,³ no such reversal was enacted. More than one in three SNAP households in New York State have children (35 percent), and more than one in four include someone who is elderly (28 percent).⁴

Since November 2013, New York City residents have lost more than 116 million meals due to SNAP cuts. On a monthly basis, these cuts are resulting in the loss of more meals for New York City residents – nearly 5.3 million – than even most of the country’s largest food banks distribute.

SNAP benefits were cut even as many communities were still recovering from Super Storm Sandy, and food-insecure New Yorkers across the city were facing an annual shortfall of 241 million meals in 2013.⁵ Emergency food providers, like food pantries and soup kitchens, work to fill this meal gap, but existing resources fall short by more than 100 million meals.⁶

¹ 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.

² Public Law 111-296.

³ As reported in Pear, R. “Congress Approves Child Nutrition Bill,” *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2010; and others

⁴ *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. United States Department of Agriculture. December 2014.

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 2015, as compared to September 2013, before SNAP cuts took effect. These findings are presented here, and compared to findings of earlier surveys in September 2014 and November 2013.

Nine out of ten (90 percent) food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported an increase in the number of visitors in September 2015, compared to September 2013.

This is significantly higher than 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.

Changes in Visitor Traffic at Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Since September 2013

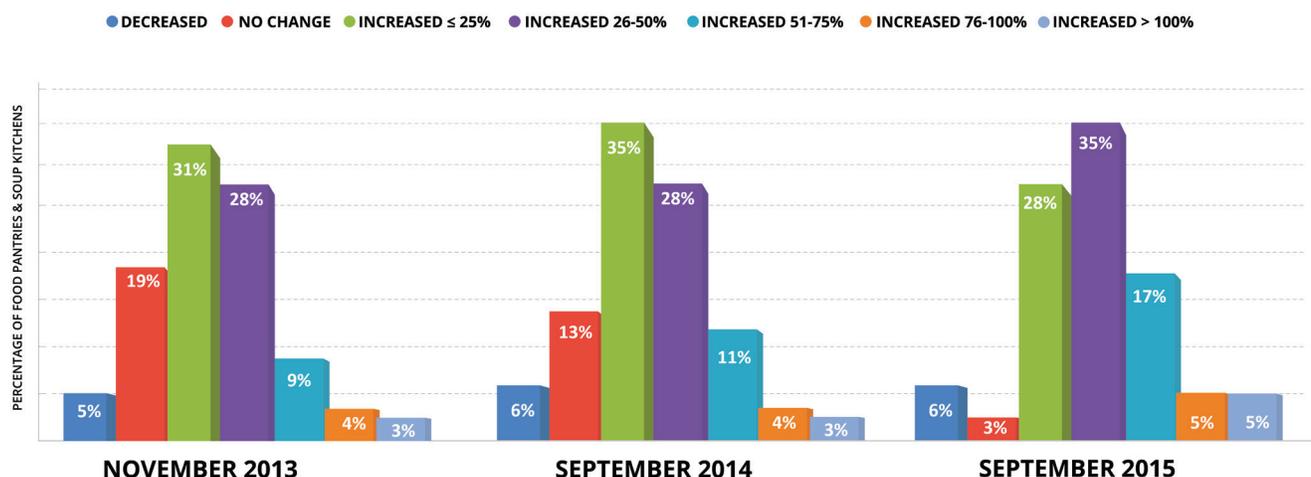


Figure 1. Note that in November 2013, food pantries and soup kitchens were asked to compare their visitor traffic to September or October of 2013; comparisons between these findings and those from September 2014 and September 2015 are therefore not exact.

As shown in Figure 1, not only have more food pantries and soup kitchens reported increasing visitor traffic as time has elapsed, the increases reported have been of greater and greater magnitude.

More than one quarter (27 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported an increase in their operating hours in September 2015, compared to September 2013.

This is an increase of 7 percentage points from the 20 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting an increase in operating hours during the month of September 2014; and a 10-percentage-point increase from the 17 percent reported during the month of November 2013.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Food Bank For New York City analysis.

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 2015.

While comparable to the percentage of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting food shortages during the month of 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).

Almost half (45 percent) of food pantries reported reducing the number of meals in their pantry bags during the month of September 2015 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food.

This is an increase of 22 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 is significantly lower – a decrease of 16 percentage points – than the percentage of food pantries reporting having reduced the amount of food in their pantry bags during the month of September 2014 (61 percent).

More than one third (36 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had turned people away during the month of September 2015 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food required to make adequate meals or pantry bags.

While an increase of 10 percentage points from the 26 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that reported turning people away due to food shortages during the month of November 2013, this is comparable to the 37 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that reported turning people away due to such food shortages during the month of September 2014.

Food Shortage in New York City's Emergency Food Network

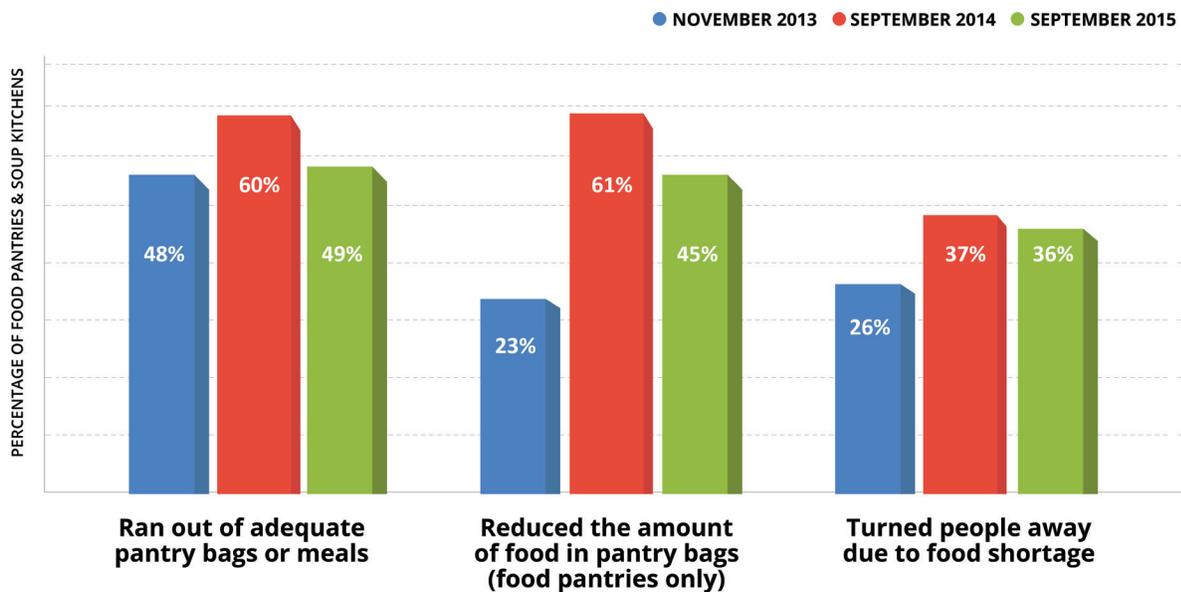


Figure 2

Conclusions

Survey findings reveal that visitor traffic at food pantries and soup kitchens has remained at elevated levels since the November 2013 cuts to SNAP. While neither these nor previous findings identify the key factors driving this demonstrated increase in need – are more New Yorkers accessing emergency food? are they relying on emergency food for longer durations and/or increasing the frequency of their visits? – the November 2013 SNAP cuts continue to represent the biggest systemic factor reducing the food purchasing power of low-income people.⁷

Yet for emergency food providers across the city, food shortages – and food rationing in response to shortages – have significantly decreased. While the data do not directly identify causes, one notable contextual factor clearly stands out: New York State's recent, one-time allocation of more than \$2 million in federal dollars to New York City emergency food providers to supplement the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) was providing a sizable and much-needed influx of additional food into the emergency food system in the third quarter of 2015, including the month for which survey data was collected.

It is also notable that more food pantries and soup kitchens have begun increasing their hours of operation. Given the considerable resource constraints within which most food pantries and soup kitchens operate – approximately 70 percent, for example, are completely volunteer-run⁸ – and the time it takes to recruit more volunteers, raise more funding, etc., a lag in expansion of services is expected.

Policy Implications

It should come as little surprise that sustained, increased need for emergency food would coincide with benefit cuts that have stripped away the ability of low-income households to afford millions of needed meals every month. With New York City losing nearly 5.3 million meals every month, this stands to become the emergency food network's new normal if appropriate steps are not taken. As Congress negotiates a reauthorization of child nutrition legislation – with funding not yet identified for such priorities as expanding access to vital programs – this should serve as a cautionary tale; no improvements to child nutrition programs should be achieved by reducing funding for the anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs that support vulnerable, low-income households' ability to afford food.

This should also serve as a cautionary tale as our state prepares to re-impose punitive time limits on receipt of SNAP benefits for as many as 249,000 able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) as a result of a provision passed in the most recent Farm Bill, the Agricultural Act of 2014.⁹ For individuals who meet the ABAWD criteria, more than three jobless months in any three-year period will result in the complete loss of SNAP benefits if they are not participating in an approved employment and training program – regardless of whether such a program is available. Many unemployed – and often difficult to employ – New Yorkers at risk of losing benefits as a result of this provision may have no other resources for food, yet the emergency food system is already struggling with insufficient resources to meet existing need. Even as our state and local governments work with the United States Department of Agriculture to secure the broadest possible waiver to preempt benefit losses, they should ensure that adequate emergency food resources are a key component of their response.

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 *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today*. Food Bank For New York City, 2012.

⁹ ABAWD estimate from *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. United States Department of Agriculture. December 2014. The 2014 Farm Bill is Public Law 113-7.

This cautionary tale's silver lining is the significant reduction in shortages at food pantries and soup kitchens when the emergency food system was infused with additional resources. Food pantries and soup kitchens can serve vulnerable New Yorkers in meaningfully better ways – with fewer food shortages and fuller pantry bags – when needed resources are in place. Unfortunately, the additional, short-term allocation of federal dollars to HPNAP has been expended and will not recur.

The baseline increases for HPNAP and the city's Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) enacted in the state and city 2015-16 budgets (respectively) represent an important investment 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.

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.¹⁰ The average cost of a meal in New York City is \$3.26.¹¹

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 770). The survey responses were collected in October 2015.

After rejection of duplicated and incomplete responses, a total of 298 completed surveys (representing 39 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: 235 food pantries (79 percent of the sample) and 55 soup kitchens (21 percent of the sample). The confidence interval for survey results, at the 95 percent level, is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

Main Office

39 Broadway, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10006
t: 212.566.7855 | f: 212.566.1463

Warehouse / Distribution Center

Hunts Point Cooperative Market
355 Food Center Drive
Bronx, NY 10474
t: 718.991.4300 | f: 718.893.3442

 [FOODBANKNYC.ORG](https://www.foodbanknyc.org)  [FOODBANKNYC](https://www.facebook.com/foodbanknyc)   [FOODBANK4NYC](https://twitter.com/FOODBANK4NYC)

Community Kitchen & Food Pantry

252 West 116th Street
New York, NY 10026
t: 212.566.7855 | f: 212.662.1945

