

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SHUTDOWN

**NYC's Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Rise Up
to Serve on Razor Thin Margins**



Introduction: From Job Security to Food Insecurity

2019 began in the midst of the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. 18,000 federal workers and additional contractors impacted in New York City found themselves exposed to new vulnerabilities – first and foremost, food insecurity. Many were introduced to the city’s Emergency Food Network of charities for the first time.

While Food Bank For New York City’s network of over 1,000 charities is expansive and diverse, navigating it can be challenging to a new visitor. Furloughed workers suddenly had to learn how to access emergency SNAP benefits and seek food assistance from community organizations. Federal workers who were required to continue working throughout the shutdown could not access some pantries that provide service during work hours and were limited to seeking services from charities that could accommodate their work schedules. Those working without pay were forced to use savings for other non-negotiable needs like transportation and housing, while some rationed food for themselves and their children.

In the face of this crisis, the Emergency Food Network served as our city’s backstop against hunger for even more of our neighbors in need. Collectively, we responded by reaching out to federal workers and contractors, connecting people to benefits and food supports, and providing special services to affected communities. Food Bank For New York City ensured emergency food service was uninterrupted and created special “pop-up” distributions for New Yorkers at iconic locations. Despite these powerful responses to the shutdown, New York City’s ability to fight hunger is threatened if federal nutrition programs, including SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) and TEFAP (the Emergency Food Assistance Program), are interrupted.

Unfortunately, the reopening of the federal government has not ended insecurity for the charitable network and many who rely on it – whether that’s in times of political crisis, or as part of the daily crisis of being poor in America. An open government does not mean immediate pay for all. The Emergency Food Network continues to serve those impacted by the shutdown, in addition to New Yorkers who struggled to afford food even before the shutdown began, but our community is shaken and deeply concerned for the security of our national response to hunger.

Sadly, federal workers are not the only ones facing hardship as a result of the shutdown and its aftermath. During the shutdown, 1.6 million low-income New Yorkers who rely on SNAP received their February benefits early, in mid-January. Current average SNAP benefits cover about two weeks’ worth of food for most households, creating a “SNAP Gap” for recipients who have to stretch this early disbursement over a much longer four- to six-week time period.

Food Bank For New York City surveyed members of the city’s Emergency Food Network in the midst of this shutdown to better understand their operating capacities, perceived threats, and their plans for the future. This report, presented at a moment of uncertainty, depicts the challenges faced by the food pantries and soup kitchens serving New York City’s food insecure. Their responses shed light on the reality of the poorest charities in the poorest communities serving the poorest New Yorkers.

Government Shutdown's Second Wave of Need: February “SNAP Gap”

The increase in demand for the Emergency Food Network from the shutdown is not limited to serving furloughed government workers. Because of the early February SNAP benefits released in mid-January, there will be an increased demand for food starting in mid-February. This “SNAP Gap” will be most intense during the public school Winter Break, when children will lose access to up to two free meals per day.

Adding context to the scale of this “SNAP Gap”:

- **One month of SNAP benefits** provides more meals to New Yorkers than **the entire annual food distribution** of Food Bank For New York City.
- For every **one furloughed federal New Yorker**, there are **90 SNAP recipients** who will be impacted by the “SNAP Gap” in NYC.

This “SNAP Gap” surge in need will impact each borough with a different intensity based on the percentage of residents in each borough that depend on SNAP benefits:

- **Bronx** – 1 in 3 rely on SNAP.
- **Brooklyn** – 1 in 4 rely on SNAP.
- **Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island** – 1 in 7 rely on SNAP.

% of Population Receiving SNAP, by Borough

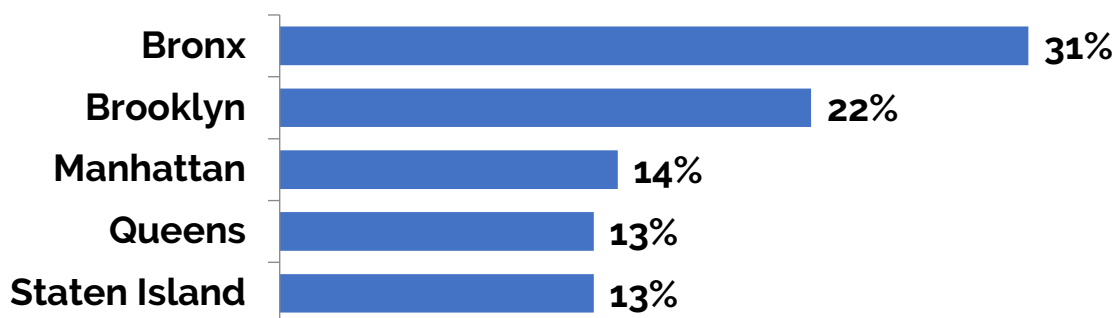
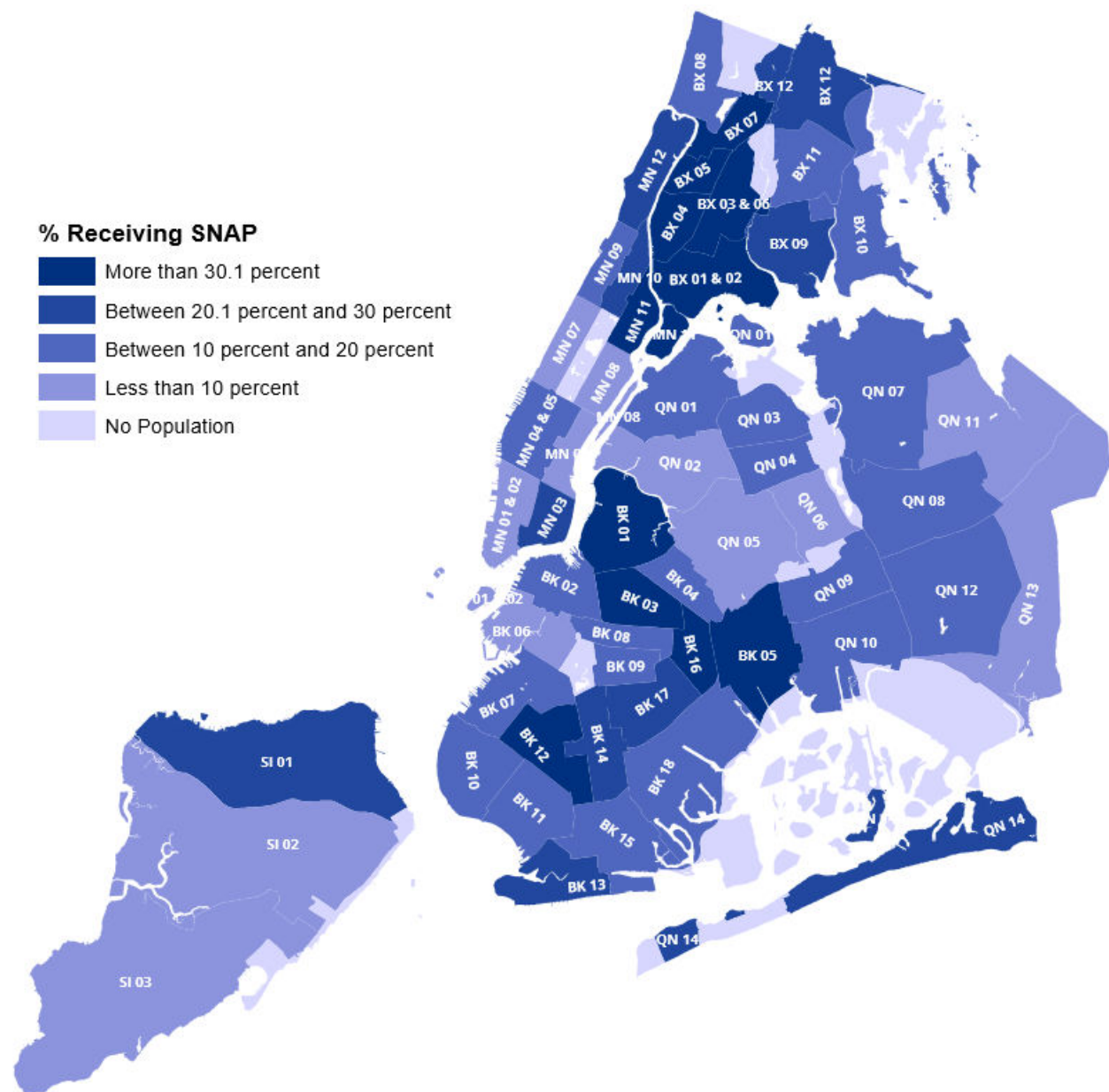


Figure 1

% of NYC Residents Relying on SNAP, by Community District



Source: Food Bank For New York City analysis based on 2017 population data from the American Community Survey and 2016 SNAP enrollment data from HRA.

Through the Lens of The Working Poor

New York City's Emergency Food Network is comprised of over 1,000 charities, all serving the city's food insecure. With 600 food pantries and 134 soup kitchens, all serving alongside shelters, day cares, youth programs, and senior centers, the safety net for the poorest New Yorkers touches all five boroughs.

Our country's longest ever government shutdown highlighted just how different the network looks when viewed through the lens of the working poor. Many people with jobs are living in need and may not be able to get to charities during distribution hours in the daytime or on weekdays. New Yorkers without access to a home kitchen will need to visit a soup pantry at least five days a week to make ends meet.

NYC Food Pantries' Service Availability

Using the lens of the working poor, only 1 in 5 pantries (20%) is available after 5 PM.

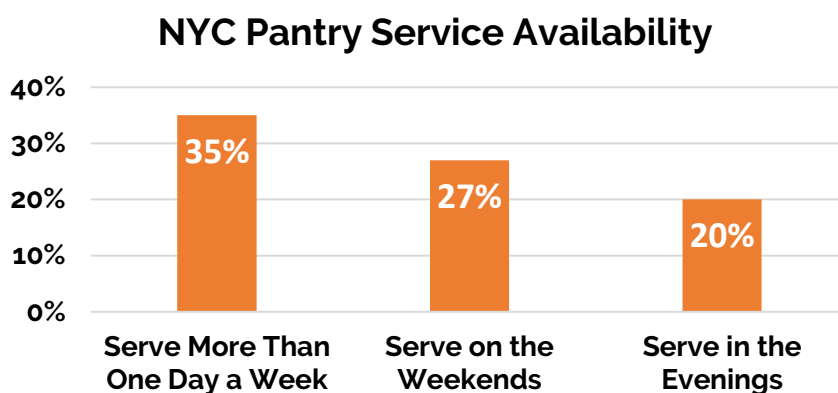


Figure 2

NYC Soup Kitchens' Service Availability

Using the lens of the working poor, about 1 in 5 soup kitchens (21%) is open five days a week.

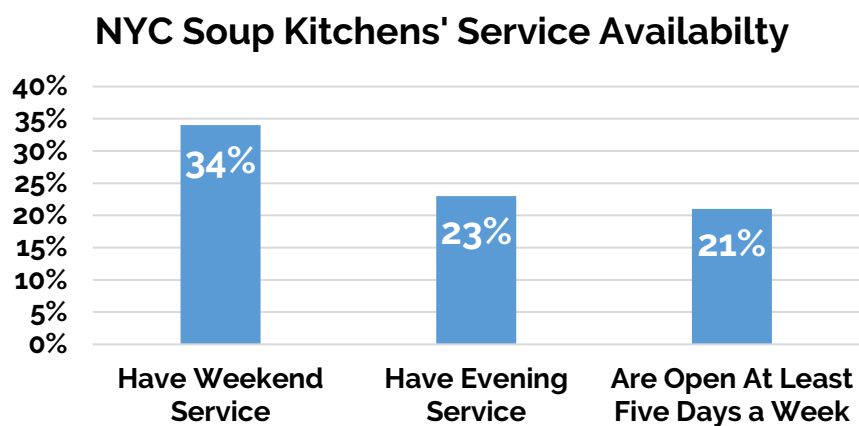


Figure 3

Who is Serving The 1.4 Million New Yorkers In Need?

To get the most up-to-date representation of New York City's Emergency Food Network at this critical point in time, Food Bank For New York City surveyed food pantries and soup kitchens in its network about their resources and needs as of January 2019.

New York City's Emergency Food Network is led by individuals that reflect the city itself:

- New York City's Emergency Food Network is led, by and large, by women and people of color.
- 1 in 5 of our network's leadership is a 1st- or 2nd-generation immigrant.
- 3% of our network's leadership are members of the LGBTQ community.

New York City's poorest communities continue to be served by the charities with the fewest resources. Like the working poor whom they serve, many charities are operating on shoestring budgets.

- Nearly 50% of our city's Emergency Food Network operate on an annual budget of **less than \$25,000**.

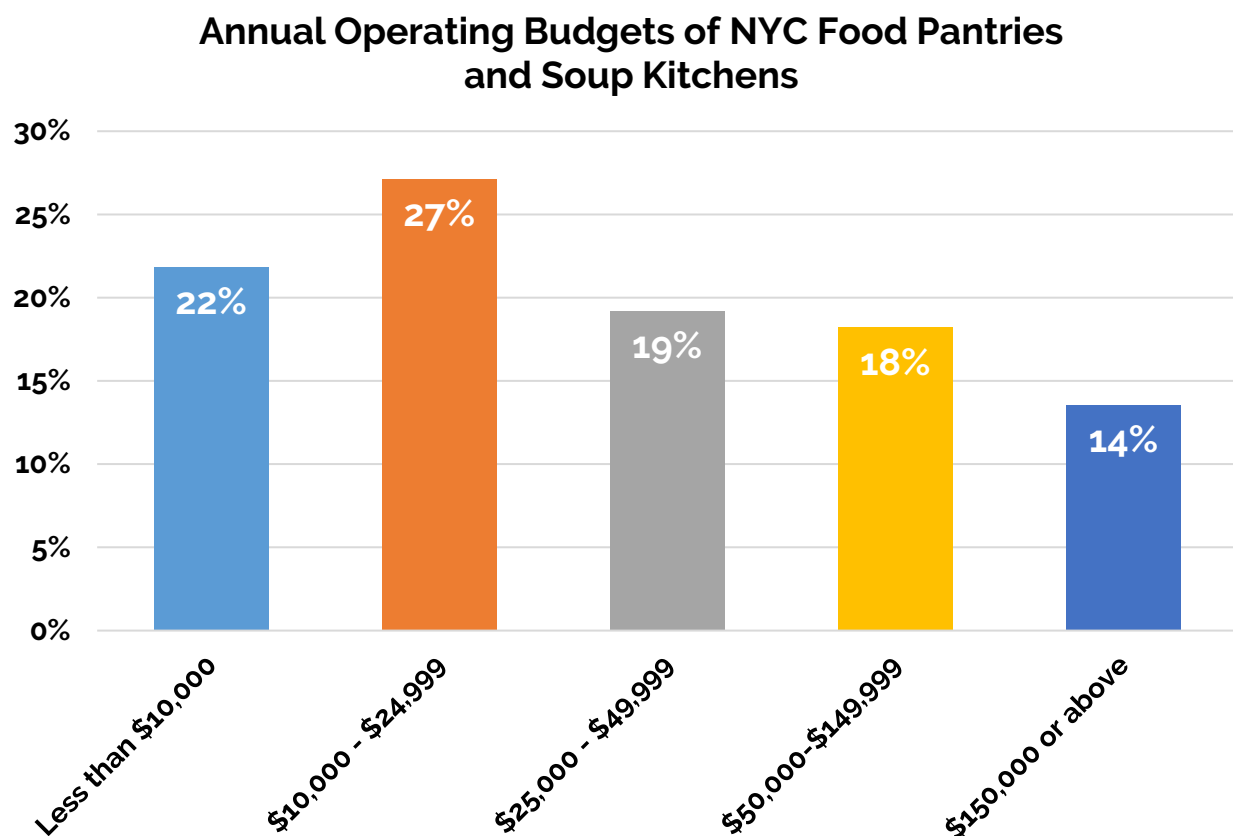


Figure 4

- 76% of our city's Emergency Food Network have **1 month of cash or less** on hand for operations.

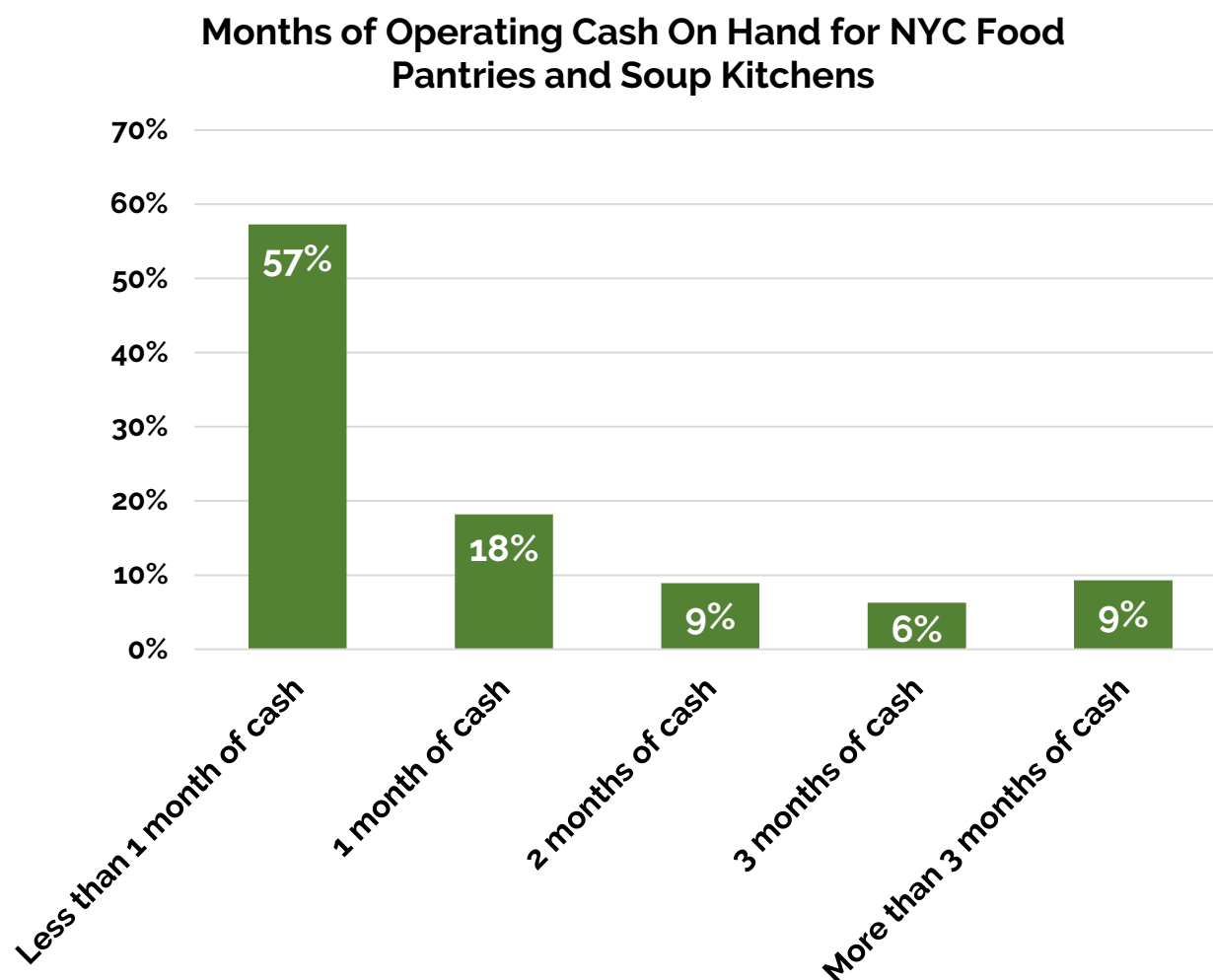


Figure 5

It is considered best practice for nonprofits to have six months of operating cash on hand for emergencies – a far cry from what is available to the majority of charities in our network. With so little operating cash, these charities are then unable to access operating support that is contingent on reimbursement for activities.

In addition to lean budgets, New York City food pantries and soup kitchens report being low on staffing for their day-to-day programming:

- The average charity has 1 paid staff person.
- 57% of charities have no paid staff.
- Average volunteer counts:
 - Food pantries and soup kitchens have an average of 3 full-time volunteers.
 - Food pantries and soup kitchens have an average of 14 part-time volunteers.

Looking at the breakdown in Figure 6, the most common budgeted expense for food pantries and soup kitchens is food. 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 that non-food programs or services are being run by volunteers, if offered 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 (22%) emergency food providers pay rent for the space they occupy.

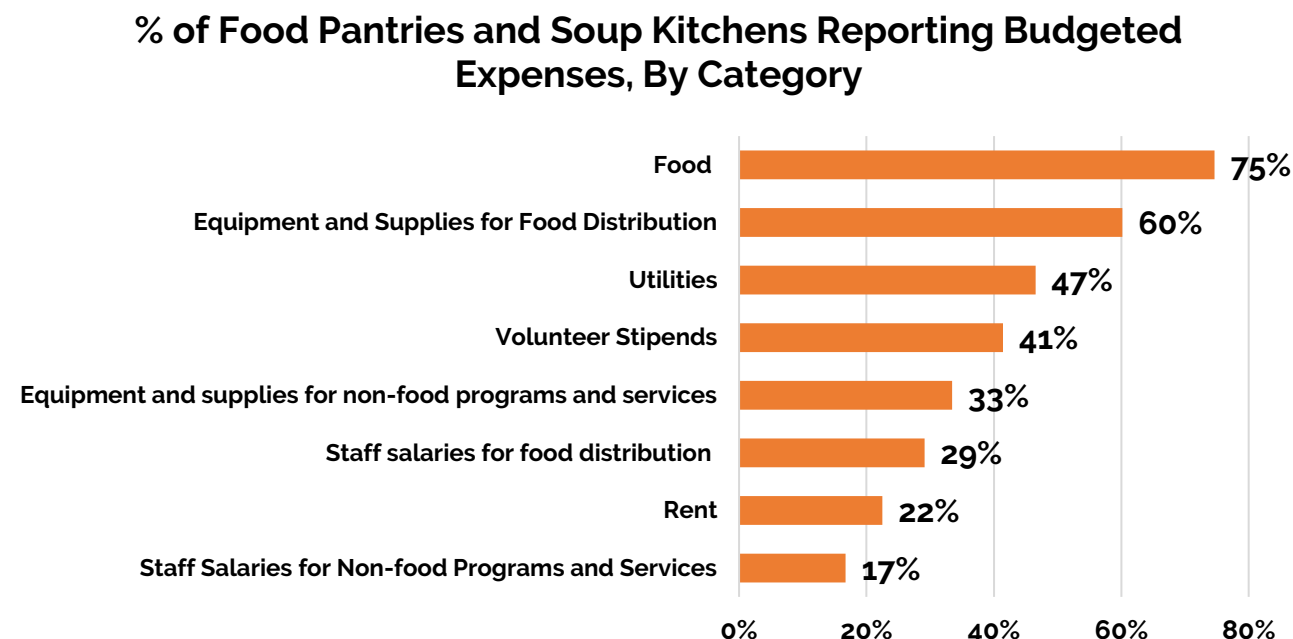


Figure 6

The Emergency Food Network Continues to Serve More New Yorkers

Food Bank For New York City's November 2018 research brief, *Reflections of Hunger from the Front Lines*, revealed that food pantries and soup kitchens are reporting increases in the number of people seeking food assistance:

- 66% report an increase in first-time visitors.
- 63% report an increase in elderly visitors.
- 62% report an increase in families with children.

A key driver for this rise in demand is the continuing inflation of food prices. Since the SNAP cuts in 2013:

- The cost of food increased by 27% across the five boroughs.
- The cost of food increased in Manhattan alone by 46%.

It is important to note that though SNAP benefit amounts are the same nationwide, those benefits do not provide as many meals in New York City. In 2018, the average price of a meal in New York City was \$3.73, while the U.S. average was \$3.00.

Additionally, the members of the network are serving far beyond their own neighborhoods. It had been conventionally believed that a neighborhood charity served only residents of that neighborhood, but **nearly 70% of food pantries and soup kitchens report serving New Yorkers from more than one borough.** Furthermore, nearly half serve New Yorkers from more than two boroughs outside of their own.

Government Threats Remain Emergency Food Network's Top Concern

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 7 details the responses of participating food pantries and soup kitchens.

81% of food pantries and soup kitchens consider policy changes by the federal government as a “major” or “moderate” threat. This is higher than other threats identified by the network:

- 63% consider funding a threat.
- 39% consider staffing needs a threat.
- 29% consider community support needs a threat.

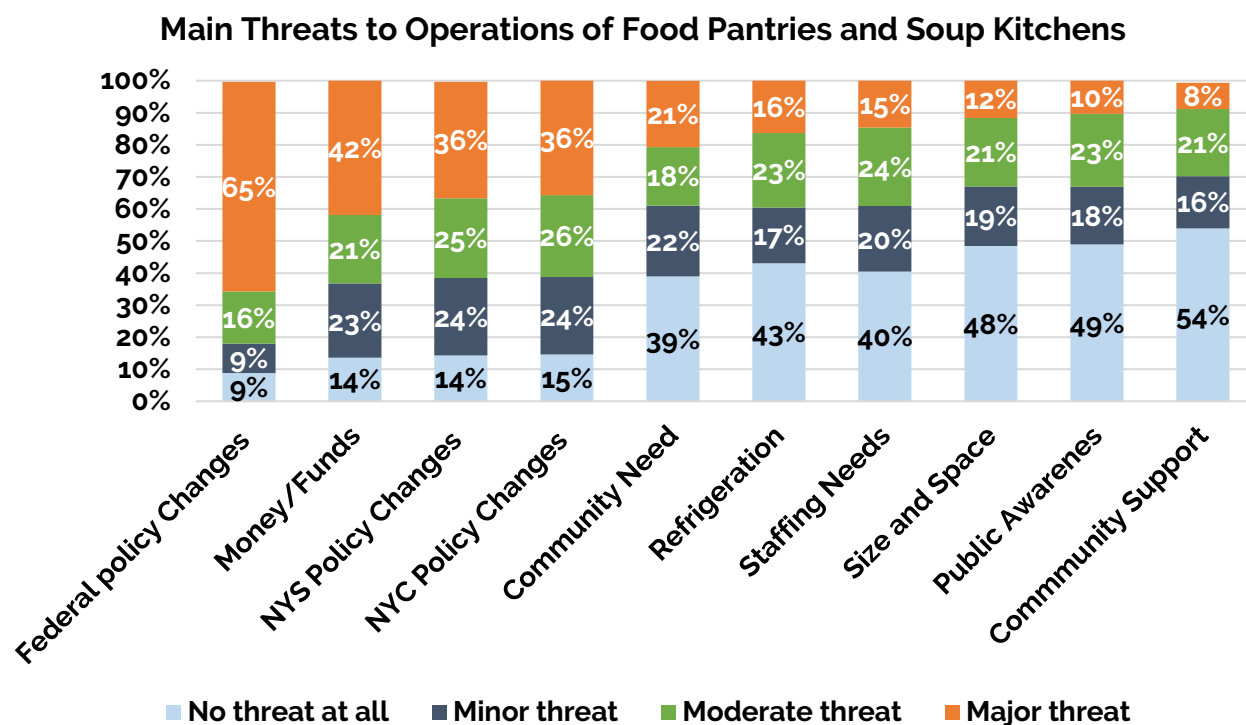


Figure 7

NYC's Emergency Food Network Plans to Build Capacity to Serve

In the face of serving new populations with meager resources, over the past 12 months, members of New York City's Emergency Food Network have augmented their capacity to serve and have made plans to enhance their services and operations over the next 12 months. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

Highlights:

- The two top planned activities for food pantries and soup kitchens over the next 12 months are increasing the amount of food distributed (52%) and increasing the nutrition of food (52%).
- The largest growing activity category year-over-year is engaging more formally in advocacy (+26%). Much of the feeding network already participated in advocacy through the submission of public comments and write-in campaigns, so this finding confirms the interest charities have in elevating the frequency or depth of their advocacy actions. With federal government threats being the top concern for food pantries and soup kitchens, charities' desire to build their ability to advocate will also continue to grow.
- Another large increase year-over-year is the percentage of food pantries and soup kitchens increasing the distribution of hygiene items (+22%).

Capacity-Building Actions Taken By Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens	TAKEN in the past 12 mos.	PLANNED in the next 12 mos.
Increase the nutrition of food	38%	52%
Increase the amount of food distributed	38%	52%
Increase fundraising	27%	51%
Increase the number of clients served	40%	50%
Increase the diversity of our food	37%	48%
Engage more formally in advocacy/policy	21%	47%
Increase the personal hygiene items distributed	24%	46%
Increase volunteers	36%	44%
Collaborate or partner with another organization	25%	44%
Increase storage space for refrigerated food	20%	38%
Increase storage space for frozen food	20%	37%
Increase storage space for dry food	18%	33%
Start using client intake software	29%	32%
Increase staff	23%	31%
Renovate a facility	14%	22%
Merge with another organization	6%	17%
Purchase a facility	7%	16%

Table 1

Conclusions

Over multiple years, the food pantries and soup kitchens of New York City have identified federal government policies as being the greatest threat to their operations. After serving through the shutdown and in preparation for the “SNAP Gap,” those threats – and their resulting challenges – have now been realized. In this moment of stretching this safety net to its limit, this survey has also identified that emergency food programs are not only operating with shoestring budgets, but are getting by with little to no operational cash beyond the current month.

Not only does the network need more resources in the form of food and funds, but funders need the understanding that grants can be best leveraged by these charities without a multi-month payback calendar. It also has capacity-building plans beyond the expansion of physical resources. Building nutrition and food diversity into your community offering takes as much thought partnership as it does financial investment to achieve success.

New York City’s network of food pantries and soup kitchens has proven itself in years past as a capable disaster relief network. The findings from this report on the strengths and opportunities for this network can identify new ways to bolster New York City’s charities to also be capable of serving during policy-made adversities.

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 811), followed by a phone call interview to non-respondents. The survey responses were collected during the first weeks of January 2019 to account for timeliness of the responses. After rejection of duplicated, outlying, and incomplete responses, a total of 302 completed surveys from 253 food pantries and 49 soup kitchens (proportionate to the composition of Food Bank’s current active membership) made up the sample for analysis. The confidence interval for all reported survey results is at a 95 percent level with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

Acknowledgments

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

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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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