## HUNGER'S NEW NORMAL: REDEFINING EMERGENCY IN POST-RECESSION NEW YORK CITY

## **PART ONE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Emergency food is most often used as the last line of defense against hunger; people turn to food pantries or soup kitchens when income, benefits, and the generosity of friends and family have been exhausted. The findings presented in this report provide insight into the experiences of the approximately 1.4 million New York City residents currently relying on emergency food programs – a number that has increased since 2007, when it stood at approximately 1.3 million.

In order to make food ends meet, most emergency food program participants must stitch together a patchwork of resources *in addition to* emergency food – accessing income support and nutrition assistance programs; relying on their own (often limited) income; and reaching out for support from family and friends. Through the Great Recession and the anemic recovery that has followed,<sup>1</sup> one of the most important pieces of this patchwork has been the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps). This report's findings show:

- Average SNAP benefits for emergency food program participants have increased considerably. The average monthly household SNAP allotment for emergency food program participants surveyed was \$228, an increase of 55 percent from \$147 in 2007.<sup>2</sup> This largely reflects an increase to benefits enacted by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) in 2009.<sup>3</sup>
- Despite increased benefit amounts, SNAP fails to last emergency food program participants through the month. For three-quarters of emergency food program participants surveyed (75 percent), SNAP benefits lasted only three weeks into the month. This is an improvement from 2007, when a greater percentage of emergency food participants (84 percent) reported running out of benefits within the first three weeks of the month.

At a time when SNAP faces deep and punishing cuts, these findings are a bleak omen. Although it is heartening to report that SNAP benefits for emergency food program participants have increased, SNAP benefits are still not sufficient to keep recipients off soup kitchen and food pantry lines. As of this report's publication, the benefit increase enacted under ARRA is scheduled to be clawed back in November 2013, resulting in across-the-board cuts for every single SNAP recipient. An estimated 76 million meals will be lost in New York City alone – more food than Food Bank For New York City distributes in a year. Additional cuts to SNAP are under consideration by Congress in the Farm Bill. When cuts take effect, even fewer recipients will be able to stretch their SNAP dollars to cover an entire month of grocery bills.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> According to economists, the Great Recession started in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The \$147 figure was reported in Food Bank For New York City's *NYC Hunger Safety Net 2007: A Food Poverty Focus report*, p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> ARRA was passed as an economic stimulus package during the Great Recession, and included a boost to SNAP benefits. While SNAP benefits are ordinarily indexed to annual changes in food costs, ARRA put into place an upfront SNAP benefit increase that was scheduled to expire when food inflation lifted underlying benefit amounts to the ARRA-boosted level.

Increases in the number of emergency food program participants who receive SNAP reflect a trend begun after release of Food Bank For New York City's 2004 *Hunger Safety Net* report, which revealed that a shocking 69 percent of emergency food participants were not enrolled in SNAP. Strategic investments of public and private dollars for targeted SNAP outreach and application assistance resulted in an increase from 31 percent enrollment in 2004 to 46 percent enrollment in 2007. Continuing outreach, along with a general swell in SNAP participation, resulted in a SNAP participation rate among emergency food program participants of 57 percent in 2012. Without these focused SNAP outreach efforts and the benefit boost ARRA provided, it is unlikely that the city's emergency food system could have performed as well as it did – particularly in light of the fact that by 2012, Food Bank For New York City's network had registered a 25 percent decrease in member soup kitchens and food pantries, representing a loss of approximately 250 agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Emergency food program participants are among the city's most vulnerable citizens. They are overwhelmingly poor -76 percent have household incomes at or below 100% of the federal poverty level; 86 percent have household incomes at or below 130% of the poverty level; and 94 percent have household incomes at or below 200% of the poverty level. Most often, they are people of color -50 percent identify as African-American/Black, and 30 percent identify as Hispanic/Latino.

Thirty-six percent of emergency food program participants are unemployed, 24 percent are disabled, and 21 percent are retired. Seven percent are veterans. Approximately one-quarter receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and somewhat less than ten percent receive Social Security Disability Income (SSDI).<sup>5</sup> More than one-half report that they, or their families, are covered by Medicaid. A little over 15 percent report receiving public assistance (or "welfare"). Forty percent of those who rent their living space receive rental assistance in the form of a public housing unit or participation in a Section 8 program. Eleven percent of emergency food program participants report that they are homeless.

Although emergency food program participants remain a particularly disadvantaged group, changes in the economy since the Great Recession have increased program participation by groups who are not conventionally perceived as disadvantaged. Between 2007 and 2012, the percentage of participants with a high school diploma or GED increased by 31 percent (from 26 percent to 34 percent), and percent with some higher education or a college degree increased by 25 percent (from 24 percent to 30 percent). In addition, more New Yorkers who identify as Caucasian/White have turned to emergency food. While still a small fraction of emergency food participants overall, the percentage of participants on food pantry and soup kitchen lines who identified as Caucasian/White increased by 55 percent (from 9 percent to 14 percent).

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Serving Under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today. Food Bank For New York City, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance programs are the largest of several Federal programs that provide assistance to people with disabilities. Financial need determines eligibility for SSI. To be eligible for SSDI benefits, potential recipients need to have worked for a certain period of time and paid Social Security taxes.

As regards performance, New York City's soup kitchens and food pantries have succeeded in serving as a vital source of needed nutrition. In 2012, almost 60 percent of emergency food program participants reported that most of the produce they ate came from the emergency food program at which they were surveyed, and approximately 40 percent reported that most of the protein they ate came from this program. A majority of EFP participants reported satisfaction with the food they received at the programs they visited.

Many emergency food program participants are accessing nutrition assistance programs besides SNAP, though in many cases, participation is relatively low. Sixty percent of emergency food program participants with school-aged children reported that their children participated in a school breakfast program; seventy percent reported that their children participated in free school lunch. One-third of emergency food program participants with school-aged children participated in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Almost one-half of emergency food program participants with children five years of age or younger (48 percent) reported that their household participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Increased participation by emergency food program participants in these programs could help cushion the impact of cuts to SNAP on the emergency food system.

Expiration of the SNAP provision in ARRA, and potential Farm Bill cuts, will take place in a still-weak economy. A slow recovery from the Great Recession has so far failed to restore the jobs that were lost during the downturn.<sup>6</sup> As of December 2012, the unemployment rate in New York City was 8.8 percent, almost double that of 4.8 percent unemployment at the start of the recession in December 2007.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the length of time that unemployed workers remain unemployed hit very high levels during the Great Recession, and the recovery has not succeeded in bringing it back down.<sup>8</sup>

If high levels, and longer periods, of unemployment have played a role in pushing up the number of New York City residents utilizing emergency food services, recent poverty figures underscore the continuing need for these services. The poverty rate, which had been declining before the Great Recession, rose as economic conditions worsened and still has not returned to previous levels. The rate increased to 21.2 percent in 2012, from 20.9 percent the year before, and 20.1 percent the year before that. Currently, approximately 1.7 million New Yorkers are living in poverty. 9

As unemployment and poverty continue to pose significant challenges, and the number of New Yorkers visiting emergency food programs has increased, New Yorkers' reliance on these services has grown. Emergency food is no longer accessed only for short periods of time due to extenuating circumstances, but is increasingly relied upon as a long-term means of keeping hunger at bay.

3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> "Chart Book: The Legacy of the Great Recession," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Special Series: Economic Recovery Watch, updated May 3, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Unemployment data as calculated by the New York State Department of Labor in accordance with procedures prescribed by the U.S. Department of Labor.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> "Why is Unemployment Duration So Long?" by Rob Valletta and Katherine Kuang. FRBSF Economic Letter, January 30, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>U.S. Census Bureau.

More than half of emergency food program participants (60 percent) reported they were long-term visitors; *i.e.*, had been coming for a year or more. Between 2007 and 2012, the percentage of emergency food program participants visiting the program at which they were surveyed for less than one year decreased (from 45 percent to 41 percent), and the percentage visiting for one year or more rose (from 56 percent to 60 percent).

On average, food pantry and soup kitchen participants make multiple visits to emergency food programs in a given month. Average number of visits made by soup kitchen participants over the last thirty days to the program at which they were surveyed was 10.6. Average number of visits made by food pantry participants over the last thirty days to the program at which they were surveyed was 3.3. One-half of emergency food program participants reported also making visits to emergency food programs other than the one at which they were surveyed. When total visits are considered (*i.e.*, visits made to both the program at which participants were surveyed and visits made to other programs), average number of total visits made over the last thirty days by soup kitchen and food pantry participants rose to 13.3 and 3.4, respectively. The number of visits participants make to emergency food programs underscores the fact that emergency food is used as a supplement to food obtained by other means.

Almost one-quarter of emergency food program participants reported that other members of their household also visited emergency food programs. Average household size reported by emergency food program participants was 2.0 for those surveyed at soup kitchens, and 3.0 for those surveyed at food pantries. Approximately one-third of emergency food program households contained children, and approximately one-third of emergency food program households contained someone 65 years of age or older.

The importance of emergency food programs to the families they serve cannot be overstated. More than one-half (55 percent) of emergency food program participants noted that without the program at which they were surveyed, they would not have access to healthy, nutritious food. Forty two percent said that they would go hungry without access to this program. When the stakes are this high, it is of concern that even 20 percent of participants, as reported, had visited the program at which they were surveyed only to find that no food was available.

The policy implications of this research are clear. SNAP works when benefit amounts are adequate; cutting SNAP benefits ignores existing need and will only deepen food poverty. The strategies for SNAP outreach which have proven successful among emergency food program participants should be replicated to better connect these same participants to available federal child nutrition programs like the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Last, in the face of looming cuts to SNAP benefits, protecting – and bolstering – the emergency food supply must remain every policymaker's imperative.