

# THE HUNGER CLIFF ONE YEAR LATER:

**56 million meals lost**

**Need for emergency food remains high**



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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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 more than 63 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 \$100 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. Working toward long-term solutions to food poverty, Food Bank develops policy and conducts research to inform community and government efforts. Learn how you can help at [foodbanknyc.org](http://foodbanknyc.org).

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# Introduction

Nearly 1.8 million New York City residents (approximately one in five) rely on the nation's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps). When across-the-board cuts to SNAP benefits went into effect on November 1, 2013, more than a million households in New York City lost, on average, nearly \$18 per month in benefits.<sup>1</sup> The food pantries and soup kitchens in Food Bank For New York City's citywide network reported immediate and widespread increases in visitor traffic that month.

## Hunger in NYC

- Almost 1.8 million New Yorkers rely on SNAP (food stamps).
- Nearly 1.4 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food for basic nutrition.
- NYC's meal gap – the shortfall that 1.4 million food-insecure New Yorkers face in a year – is 250 million meals.

Nearly one year later, has this increased need been sustained, or was it a one-time phenomenon? To answer this question, Food Bank issued a follow-up survey to food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs about client demand at their sites in September 2014, compared to September 2013 (two months prior to the cuts). The findings presented in this research brief provide a snapshot into the need that continues to confront New York City's emergency food network since those sweeping cuts to SNAP took effect.

## The Hunger Cliff: More than 56 Million Meals Lost – and Counting

The SNAP cuts that took place on November 1, 2013 were legislated by Congress in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, as a tradeoff to pay for a six-cents-per-meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements.<sup>2</sup> For the first time in the history of the program, all recipients saw their benefits reduced.<sup>3</sup> Note that more than one in three SNAP households in New York State have children, and close to one third include someone who is elderly.<sup>4</sup>

## What is the Meal Gap?

The Meal Gap represents the meals missing from the homes of families and individuals struggling with food insecurity (the lack of sufficient money or other resources to secure adequate, nutritious food year-round for all household members).

Factors like poverty and local food costs determine how big a city's meal gap is.

So far, these cuts have resulted in an 11-month loss of more than 56 million meals in New York City alone – more food than most food banks across the country distribute in a year.<sup>5</sup>

Even before SNAP benefits were cut, food-insecure New Yorkers were facing an annual shortfall of 250 million meals in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Emergency food programs like food pantries and soup kitchens, approximately 800 of which currently serve the five boroughs as part of Food Bank For New York City's network, work to fill this meal gap, but current distribution falls more than 100 million meals short of the need.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Public Law 111-296.

<sup>3</sup> "November 1 SNAP Cuts Will Affect Millions of Children, Seniors and People with Disabilities." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. October 24, 2013.

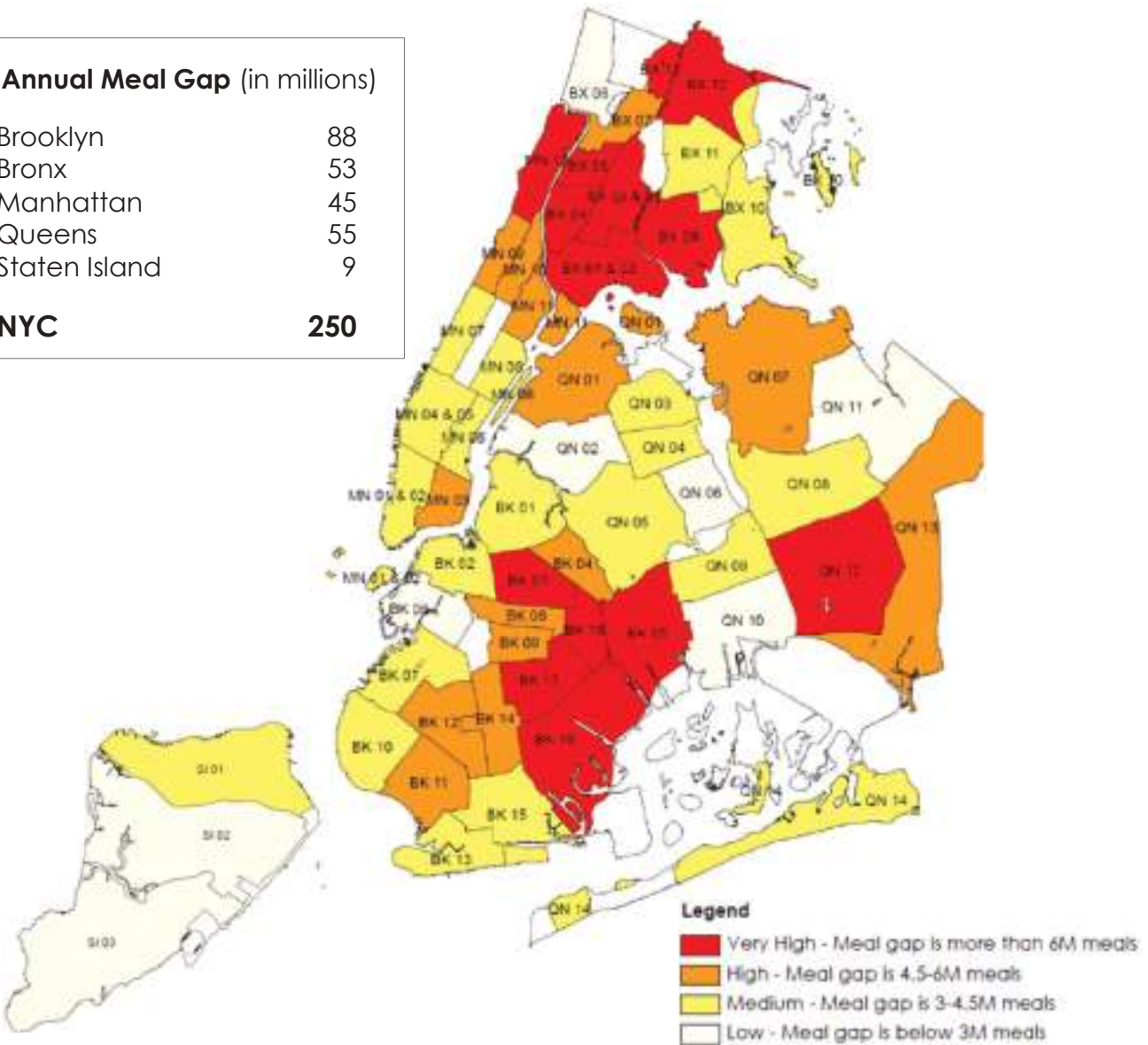
<sup>4</sup> *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2012*. United States Department of Agriculture. February 2014.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Gundersen, C., Engelhard, E., Satoh, A., & Waxman E. *Map the Meal Gap 2014: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity at the County Level*. Feeding America, 2014.

# Meal Gap by Community District

Annual Meal Gap (in millions)	
Brooklyn	88
Bronx	53
Manhattan	45
Queens	55
Staten Island	9
<b>NYC</b>	<b>250</b>



Source: Food Bank For New York City analysis of Gundersen, C., E. Engelhard, A. Satoh, & E. Waxman. Map the Meal Gap 2014: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level. Feeding America, 2014.

Because SNAP benefits are often exhausted before the end of the month – particularly in New York City, where food costs are higher than average – SNAP recipients are among those who turn to emergency food providers for needed food. Indeed, even before benefits were reduced, more than 40 percent of SNAP recipients in New York City were utilizing food pantries and soup kitchens to help keep food on the table.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Great Recession of 2007, New York City's food pantries and soup kitchens have struggled to meet increased need with diminished resources. The five years between 2007 and 2012 saw New York City's emergency food network shrink by 25 percent – a loss of nearly 250 food pantries and soup kitchens – with remaining programs trying to fill the gaps.<sup>8</sup> It is within this already grave deficit of food and support infrastructure that SNAP cuts took place.

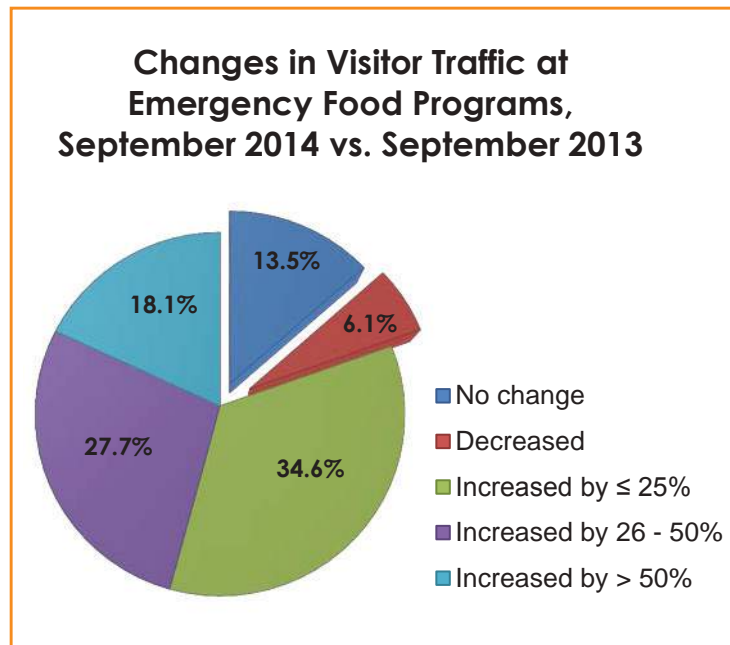
<sup>7</sup> Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City. Food Bank For New York City, 2013.  
<sup>8</sup> Serving Under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today. Food Bank For New York City, 2012.

## Findings

**More than three-quarters (80 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported an increase in the number of visitors in September 2014, compared to September 2013.**

- 34.6 percent reported an increase of 25 percent or less;
- 27.7 percent reported an increase between 26 percent and 50 percent; and
- 18.1 percent reported an increase of more than 50 percent.

These increases are comparable to the increases in visitor traffic reported by food pantries and soup kitchens in November 2013, as compared to the immediately preceding months (September/October 2013).



**Three in five (60 percent) 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 2014.**

This is an increase of 12 percentage points from the 48 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting these shortages during the month of November 2013.

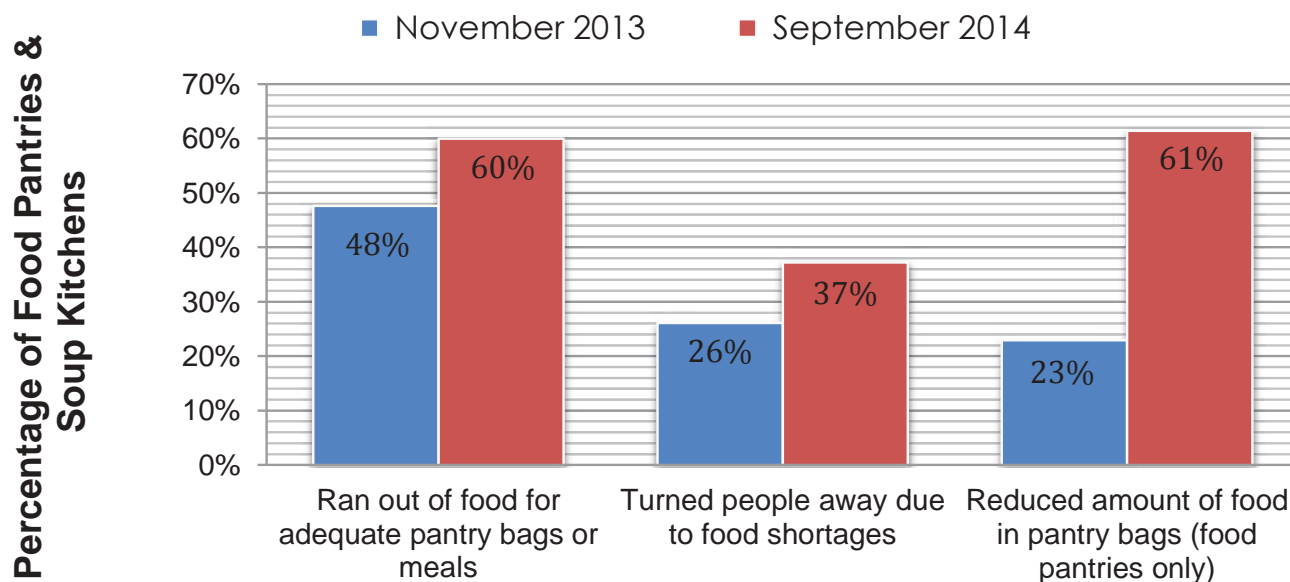
**Nearly two in five (37 percent) food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had turned people away during the month of September 2014 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food required to make adequate meals or pantry bags.**

This is an increase of 11 percentage points from the 26 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that reported turning people away due to such food shortages during the month of November 2013.

**More than three in five (61 percent) food pantries reported reducing the number of meals in their pantry bags during the month of September 2014 because they had run out of food, or particular types of food.**

This is an increase of 38 percentage points from the 23 percent of food pantries that reported reducing the number of meals in their pantry bags due to such food shortages during the month of November 2013.

# Food Shortages in NYC's Emergency Food Network



## Conclusions

While the increases in visitors reported in November 2013 at emergency food providers were dramatic, these findings show that elevated need in the wake of the Hunger Cliff has remained. Moreover, these findings likely paint a truer picture of the emergency food network's challenges in addressing this need than the results from November 2013, as November is a month when donations to the emergency food network are unusually high. In addition, a class action settlement in November 2013 that provided retroactive benefits to wrongfully sanctioned households resulted in tens of millions of dollars in additional SNAP benefits issued to New York City residents that month. The survey findings from September 2014, by contrast, reflect neither holiday giving nor other special circumstances.

Although survey results do not specifically indicate the kind of visitors driving the increases demonstrated, the SNAP cuts that took effect on November 1, 2013 continue to represent the biggest systemic factor reducing the food purchasing power of low-income people – indeed, other factors that meaningfully affect emergency food program participation, like local unemployment, have continued to decrease since November 2013<sup>9</sup> – making it likely that SNAP recipients experiencing a reduction in benefits are responsible for the increases seen.

The operational stress that emergency food providers continue to experience as a result of this need is reflected in the higher percentages of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting that they had run out of food for adequate meals or pantry bags or that they had to turn people away because they had run out of food in September 2014. In the same month, approximately three in five food pantries reported that they had to reduce the amount of food in their pantry bags because they had run out of food.

<sup>9</sup> Food Bank For New York City analysis of New York State Department of Labor data through September 2014.

## Policy Implications

Fortifying our emergency food system – the last line of defense against hunger – has never been more crucial. That more than half of food pantries and soup kitchens ran out of food in a single month should alarm and dismay every New Yorker who believes none of our neighbors should go to bed hungry. Federal emergency food resources were increased in the last Farm Bill (passed in January 2014); to respond to this crisis, our State and City governments should follow suit.

SNAP remains our nation's first line of defense against hunger; monthly benefits enable more than \$250 million in food spending in New York City every month. However, research shows that the adequacy of SNAP benefits was already an issue prior to November 2013 (given the 40 percent participation rate of SNAP recipients in emergency food programs), and as these cuts indicate, the households that rely on these resources cannot easily replace them. Congress should work to address the issue of benefit adequacy so that this program can more effectively keep people off food pantry and soup kitchen lines. Meanwhile, our State and City governments should redouble their efforts to expand access to SNAP by availing of federal waivers and options to lower barriers to access, and through targeted outreach efforts.

In addition, maximizing participation in school meals, through expansion of Universal School Meals and Breakfast after the Bell options, will provide hundreds of thousands of New York City children with access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch.

Acknowledging that poverty and food insecurity are closely linked, continued progress on proven and effective poverty alleviation efforts, including expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and living wage jobs, should be a focus at all levels of government.

## Methodology

To generate these findings, 567 food pantries and 148 soup kitchens (total=715) in Food Bank's emergency food network were surveyed about the number of visitors they saw in September 2014, compared to September 2013.

The survey was sent in October 2014 to the email addresses of the directors of the food pantries and soup kitchens currently listed as members of Food Bank's agency network. The survey was completed online, and returned to Food Bank electronically. A total of 260 completed surveys (representing 36 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: 205 food pantries (79 percent of the sample); and 55 soup kitchens (21 percent of the sample). The confidence interval for results, at the 95 percent level, is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

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