



# RESEARCH BRIEF

## VISITOR TRAFFIC INCREASES AT EMERGENCY FOOD PROVIDERS POST-SNAP CUTS

Nearly 1.9 million New York City residents (almost one in five) rely on the nation's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps). Before across-the-board cuts to SNAP benefits went into effect on November 1, 2013, monthly household benefits in New York City averaged \$281 – or approximately \$3.4 billion annually.<sup>1</sup>

What changes in visitor traffic did the food pantries and soup kitchens in Food Bank For New York City's citywide network see after the SNAP cuts went into effect November 1? To answer this question, Food Bank surveyed food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs about demand at their sites in November 2013, compared to immediately preceding months and to November 2012. The findings presented in this research brief provide a snapshot into the new levels of need that have confronted New York City's emergency food network within the first month of these sweeping cuts to SNAP.

### Background

#### Hunger in NYC

- Nearly 1 in 3 New Yorkers (2.6 million) struggle to afford food.
- About 1.9 million New Yorkers rely on SNAP (food stamps).
- About 1.4 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food for basic nutrition.

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 cent per meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements.<sup>2</sup> For the first time in the history of the program, every recipient saw their benefits reduced, with an average loss of \$29 in monthly benefits for a household of three.<sup>3</sup> Note that two in five SNAP households in New York State have children, and close to one third include someone who is elderly.<sup>4</sup>

When faced with a shortage of food, New Yorkers can turn to 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. 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 in need. 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>5</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>6</sup> It is within this context that SNAP cuts took place.

<sup>1</sup> "Temporary and Disability Assistance Statistics: October 2013." New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

<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 2011*. United States Department of Agriculture. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *Hunger's New Normal: Redefining Emergency in Post-Recession New York City*. Food Bank For New York City. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> *Serving Under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today*. Food Bank For New York City. 2012.

## Findings

**Approximately three-quarters (76 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported that number of visitors in November 2013 increased compared to September/ October 2013.**

- 31 percent reported an increase of 25 percent or less;
- 29 percent reported an increase between 26 percent and 50 percent; and
- 16 percent reported an increase of more than 50 percent.

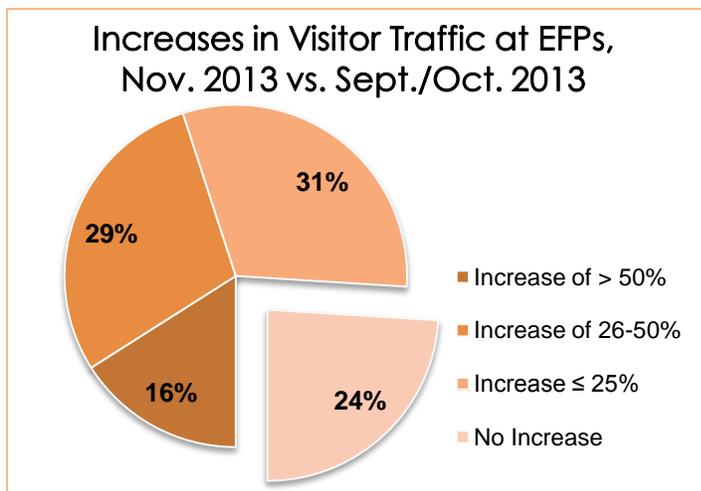
During the month of November 2013, almost one-half (48 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had run out of food, or particular types of food, required to make adequate meals or pantry bags.

During the month of November 2013, almost one-quarter of food pantries (23 percent) reported that they had reduced the number of meals their pantry bag provided.

During the month of November 2013, approximately one-quarter (26 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens reported that they had turned people away because they had run out of food, or particular types of food, required to make adequate meals or pantry bags.

**85 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported that number of visitors in November 2013 increased compared to November 2012.**

- 29 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported an increase of 25 percent or less;
- 31 percent reported an increase between 26 percent and 50 percent; and
- 20 percent reported an increase of more than 50 percent.<sup>7</sup>



## Conclusions

The fact that increases in visitors were observed when food pantries and soup kitchens were asked to compare number of visitors in November 2012 to number of visitors in November 2013 makes it very likely that increases from September/October 2013 to November 2013 are largely not attributable to seasonal variation related to the fact that November is a holiday month.

Although survey results do not specifically indicate the kind of visitors driving the increases demonstrated, the SNAP cuts that took effect November 1 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, actually decreased in November 2013<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Five percent did not specify how large an increase they experienced.

<sup>8</sup> “Statewide Unemployment Rate Drops to 7.4% - Lowest Level in Almost 5 Years” (press release). New York State Department of Labor. Dec. 19, 2013.

– making it likely that SNAP recipients experiencing a reduction in benefits are responsible for the increases seen.

The operational stress that can be caused by increases of the magnitude outlined here is reflected in the relatively high percentages of food pantries and soup kitchens reporting that they could not provide adequate meals or pantry bags in November 2013 because they had run out of food or that they had to turn people away. In the same month, approximately one-quarter of food pantries reported that they had reduced the number of meals provided by their pantry bags.

## Policy Implications

Additional reductions in SNAP benefits are looming. The Farm Bill, currently up for reauthorization in Congress, sets policy and funding for SNAP and emergency food (through the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP) every five years. Reauthorization negotiations provide an opportunity to strengthen anti-hunger programs; instead, leaders in both the Senate and the House of Representatives have promoted proposals that would cut SNAP and worsen hunger in New York City.

News reports indicate that the bicameral, bipartisan Conference Committee currently finalizing the Farm Bill is considering a \$9 billion cut to the program, which would result in 190,000 recipient households in New York City losing, on average, \$90-\$130 per month. If these cuts become a reality, it is likely that more SNAP recipients than ever will turn to Food Bank's emergency food programs – a prospect for which the emergency food network is ill prepared. Vulnerable New Yorkers could be left with nowhere to turn for needed food.

Research shows that the adequacy of SNAP benefits was already an issue (given the 40 percent participation rate of SNAP recipients in emergency food programs) prior to November 2013. A Farm Bill proposal that contains further cuts to SNAP will only drive more households into food insecurity, and deepen the need among many of those already considered food insecure. SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger; rather than further reducing benefits, Congress should be working to address the issue of benefit adequacy so that this program can more effectively keep people off food pantry and soup kitchen lines.

While the Farm Bill Conference Committee is reportedly nearing completion of its work, there remains a window of opportunity for Congress to eliminate the proposed cuts and find ways to strengthen this vital program.

Emergency food is the last line of defense against hunger, and fortifying our emergency food system has never been more crucial. That roughly 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.

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

## Methodology

To generate these findings, 522 food pantries and 138 soup kitchens (total=660) in Food Bank's emergency food network were surveyed about the number of visitors they saw in November 2013, compared to both September/October 2013 and November 2012.

The survey was sent in December 2013 to the email addresses of the directors of the food pantries and soup kitchens currently listed as members of Food Bank For New York City's agency network. The survey was completed online, and returned to Food Bank electronically. 142 food pantries and 46 soup kitchens (total=188) completed the survey, for a response rate of 28 percent. The confidence interval for results, at the 95% level, is plus or minus 6 percentage points.

## Acknowledgments

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### ABOUT FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY



Food Bank For New York City recognizes 31 years as the city's major hunger relief organization working to end food poverty in the five boroughs. As the city's hub for integrated food poverty assistance, Food Bank tackles the hunger issue on three fronts — food distribution, income support, and nutrition education. Through its network of community-based member programs citywide, Food Bank helps provide 400,000 free meals a day to New York City residents in need. Its income support services help poor New Yorkers apply for SNAP benefits, and its free income tax services helps those who are employed gain access to the Earned Income Tax Credit, putting millions of dollars back into their pockets and helping them achieve greater dignity and independence. Food Bank's hands-on nutrition education programs in the public schools reach thousands of children, teens and adults who learn to eat healthfully on a budget. Learn how you can help at [foodbanknyc.org](http://foodbanknyc.org).

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