
THE THINK TANK @ THE THINKUBATOR



FOOD INSECURITY IN THE BRONX

POLICY BRIEF

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About The Thinkubator

The Thinkubator exists to train, educate, and connect Bronx youth to work-based learning experiences, employment, and educational opportunities. Youth are connected to businesses, nonprofits, elected officials, and government to partake in our US democracy and impact change. We seek to prepare diverse, low-income youth from the Bronx to succeed in the workplace and the world.

About The Think Tank at The Thinkubator

We are a youth-oriented research center focused on understanding The Bronx as a contested, complex urban form, and addressing narratives of marginalized - Black, Brown, Female, and Low-Income communities.



Food Insecurity in the Bronx

Working Policy Paper

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Highlights:

The Think Tank recommends the following:

- **Direct resources to local Bronx nonprofits;**
- **Expand food selection methods for families with children;**
- **Advance crucial benefits for vulnerable New Yorkers;**
- **Advocate against the federal government's attack on census.**

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on New York City residents. During the month of March, the City represented the epicenter of COVID-19 infection in the United States. The severity of the Coronavirus shock hit underscored the interlocking areas of work-based protections, community-based services, and food insecurity. COVID-19 infection exacerbated inequities in the labor market. Millions of New Yorkers today face precarious positions, especially the *essential workers* who are at risk of the virus and the recently unemployed. Unemployment has devastating effects on low-income households, increasing the likelihood of food insecurity.

Food deprivation is a necessary concern for policy-makers. Significant physical health problems among Bronx residents are directly related to poor nutrition and food insecurity. A principle health policy question emerges: (1) *what are the nutritional needs of Bronx residents during the*



COVID-19 pandemic? This analysis—based on published data and recent community-based efforts by Bronx nonprofits and The Thinkubator—seeks to identify food insecurity prevention policies and improve public health in the Bronx.

A Troubling Relationship: Poverty and Food Insecurity

Hunger is a persistent and regular feature of New York City. The COVID-19 crisis, set against the backdrop of a recession, marks a heightened risk of hunger for New Yorkers. Access to a customary diet is a pressing challenge for communities like the Bronx. Despite the volumes of research on household-level food insecurity, this section will explore two dynamics in the Bronx:¹

1. *Income as a principal determinant of food insecurity.*
2. *Place-based circumstances that impact low-income households.*

Food Insecurity and Financial Resources

Combating food insecurity is made increasingly challenging due to the current U.S. labor market. Since the 1990's, the U.S. has pursued the following three policy goals. First, individual entitlement to assistance was replaced with work requirements. Second, government budgets expended limited resources into workforce development. Third, social policy prioritizes expanding work-based programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit. These structural conditions established a large low-wage workforce susceptible to food insecurity.

Determinants of food insecurity are commonly collected through household income and expenditure surveys. Unsurprisingly, estimates on food insecurity in the U.S. are based on

¹ The term “*food insecurity*” is used in a general sense. It refers to a household condition in which all members do not have access to adequate food. A report by The Mayor’s Office of Food Policy titled “Food Metrics” utilizes a “meal gap” measurement to identify missing meals from households.



income in relation to the federal poverty threshold.² Researchers in New York City have undertaken better methods to measure poverty referred to as the *NYCgov poverty measure*. This alternative poverty measure takes into account price variations across geographic areas as well as the role of assistance programs. Furthermore, expenses that households incur for commuting to work, childcare, and medical are deducted from income. A report by Chatterjee et al. titled *New York City Government Poverty Measure 2005-2016*, highlights the effect of assistance programs on poverty. The Food Stamp program (or referred to as SNAP) is important for keeping households out of poverty, lowering the poverty rate by 3.3 percentage points. Likewise, the City's School Meals program lowers the poverty rate by .6 percentage points.³ Both of these programs are being called upon to help households who lack financial resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. As will be discussed in the following section, place-based circumstances also impact vulnerable households.

Place-Based Circumstances and Food Insecurity

The Bronx—particularly the South Bronx—has been forced to wrestle with dual issues related to the shutdown of local businesses and essential services. Historically, the Bronx has had the poorest health outcomes than other boroughs in New York City. A report by the City's Health and Hospitals titled *Community Health Needs Assessment* (2019) offers insight into current health inequities. The Bronx ranked 62 out of 62 counties in New York for its health ranking. Among Bronx residents, 39% have more than one chronic condition.⁴ Detailed in this report are

² The original U.S. poverty measure was developed in the 1960's and was informed by the Department of Agriculture's *Economy Food Plan*. During this time period food represented one-third of the average household budget; there, the poverty threshold was derived from the cost of a minimum diet multiplied by three to allow for other expenditures on goods and services.

³ Chatterjee, Debipriya, John Krampner, Vicky Virgin, and Jihyun Shun. "New York City Government Poverty Measure 2005-2016." *Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity*, April 2018, 42.

⁴ Community Health Needs Assessment Implementation Strategy Plan. (2019). New York City Health & Hospitals, 4.



other types of disease burden prevalent in the Bronx including diabetes, asthma, and heart disease. The introduction of the pandemic further intensifies issues surrounding poverty and access to food in this community.

A report by Hunger Free America titled *New York City Hunger Report 2019* identifies food insecurity as a pressing issue for residents. According to the report, 12.2% (or 1 million) residents are living in food insecure households in the City. In the Bronx, one-in-four residents (or 23.1%) live in food insecure households, representing the highest rate than any other borough.⁵ Data collected from food pantries and soup kitchens showcased an increase in populations being served. Notably, Bronx food distributors identified a growing demand from key groups such as families (72.4% increase), elderly (51.7% increase), and residents who lost access to means-tested programs (51.7% increase).⁶ The Food Bank For New York City report titled *Fighting More than COVID-19* adds further insights into the strain of emergency food providers. According to the report (June 2020), 53% of food distributors reported running out of food during the month of April. The complexity of safely dealing with COVID-19 infection has prompted emergency food providers (EFP) to close. In proportion to other boroughs, the Bronx has seen the highest number of EFP close. An estimated 50% of EFP were forced to close in the Bronx by Mid-April 2020.⁷ As a vital support network for the most vulnerable, the closure of EFP forces residents to venture further away from their local communities; which, heightens the risk for Covid-19 exposure. To explore current anti-hunger initiatives, the next section will examine efforts by The Thinkubator, along with local Bronx partners.

⁵ Gibson, A., Berg, J., & Aber, N. (2019). The Affordability Crisis and Hunger: Soaring Costs For Housing and Other Basics of Living Leave Less for Food. *Hunger Free America*, 13.

⁶ Gibson et al., Affordability Crisis and Hunger, 14.

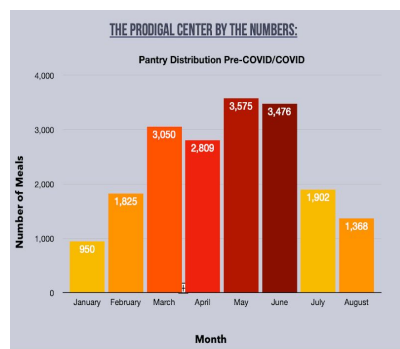
⁷ Koible, W., & Figueroa, I. (2020). Fighting More than Covid-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During A Pandemic. *Food Bank For New York City*, 14.



Measuring Food Insecurity in Bronx:

To explore food insecurity, The Thinkubator conducted a survey with partners as well as relied on quantitative data tracked by partners The Bronx Community Foundation's Bronx Community Relief Efforts, World Central Kitchen (WCK), and RAP4BRONX.⁸ The opt-in survey included both an online questionnaire sent to community-based organizations (providers) and surveys administered in-person at food distribution locations in the Bronx. The Thinkubator, along with partners, provided several means to reduce food insecurity. This includes in-kind food transfers classified as prepared meals, grocery bags, assortment bags of produce, and food boxes. Food transfer data collected by RAP4BRONX identifies prepared meals (72%), grocery bags (14%), and assortment packages of produce (10%) as the main methods of food transfers to reduce hunger during COVID-19.⁹

As New York City began to impose social distancing and isolation measures, the requests for assistance at food pantries rose sharply. The Thinkubator acquired data from the Prodigal Center,



who examined months from January to August, 2020. Between February and March, meal distribution increased 67%. While there was a slight decline in meals served between March and April (7.9%), the months May and June featured a heightened risk of hunger.¹⁰ For example, meals served increased by over

⁸ Notably, data is derived from the financial support of the Bronx Community Foundation's funding of local initiatives. The survey results offer insight into general points related to food distribution. Thinkubator relies on "performance data" to identify major points.

⁹ See Figures in the "Appendices" section for additional data on meals served.

¹⁰ Thinkubator staff acknowledged that during the warmer months (i.e., March and April), low-income populations in the Bronx access meals through different methods such as "community cookouts." This may be a reason for a slight decline in meals served by food pantries and soup kitchens.



20% for months May and June in comparison to April.¹¹ The rise in food insecurity is likely due to a rise in unemployment. Related literature on unemployment suggests that March and April 2020 featured massive layoffs.¹² Consistent with currently published research, data collected and presented by The Thinkubator offer two interpretations. One interpretation is that there has been a sharp demand for in-person services (i.e., food distributors). Second, there is a heightened risk of insecurity for single parent households, older populations, and the low-income Bronx residents.

Recommendations for the Bronx Community:

In response to food insecurity associated with COVID-19, New York City must introduce a series of measures to provide basic assistance to vulnerable households. To address hunger in the Bronx, policies are aimed at expanding food outreach efforts as well as strengthening protections for underserved communities. The following recommendations are prepared by The Thinkubator:

1. Direct resources to local Bronx nonprofits. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated financial shortfalls for public and nonprofit organizations. The City must help to sustain services in high-need communities, while operating in line with social distancing measures. Nonprofit leaders and recent reports identified a troubling dynamic with food distribution. On the one hand, there is a growing demand in clients seeking services; on the other hand, local services have closed due to a lack of food and/ or volunteers. The Mayor and Council should increase funding to nonprofits assisting in food distribution.

¹¹ Data collected shows an increase of 27% between April and May. Equally notable, a 24% increase in meals served between April and June.

¹² Reports produced by the National Bureau of Economic Research forecast the path of the Covid-19 downturn. Based on information available, rates of temporary unemployment rose significantly between January and May 2020.



2. Expand food selection methods for families with children. The closure of schools and child care programs have worsened barriers to food access. A report by Dunn et al., titled *Feeding Low-Income Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (April 2020) acknowledges that schools serve as a necessary safety net. Meals and snacks from schools or child care facilities fulfill up to two-thirds of children's daily nutritional needs.¹³ The closure of schools are directly connected to a loss of access to free or reduced-price meals for children. For a community like the Bronx, the City must offer a flexible and tailored approach to serving families. New York City's Department of Education should aggressively implement new services in high-need areas. This can range from "Grab-n-Go" meals to meal delivery services.

3. Advance crucial benefits for vulnerable New Yorkers. Between March and June, the City experienced record levels of unemployment. City Council must develop a plan to identify and enroll populations isolated from crucial benefit programs. Programs such as SNAP, are designed to see an increase in participation when the economy is weaker and lessen when the economy is stronger. Local food distributors can play a role in screening residents not connected to programs such as young adults, college students, and the newly unemployed. Establishing a streamlined process for programs during Covid-19 is a key strategy for reducing hunger and food insecurity.

4. Advocate against the federal government's attack on census. The census is a necessary foundation for distributing billions of dollars in aid to marginalized communities. While held every ten years, the census has historically been plagued by undercounting Black and Hispanic populations. The recent efforts by the Trump Administration—efforts to exclude noncitizens from the census count—raises concerns of a serious undercount in 2020. Elected leaders must continue to combat anti-immigrant policies at the federal level. By denying undocumented immigrants to be counted, communities like the Bronx are further marginalized.

¹³ Dunn, Caroline G., Erica Kenney, Sheila E. Fleischhacker, and Sara N. Bleich. "Feeding low-income children during the Covid-19 pandemic." *New England Journal of Medicine* 382, no. 18 (2020): e40.



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Appendix

Appendix A: Additional visuals of food distribution

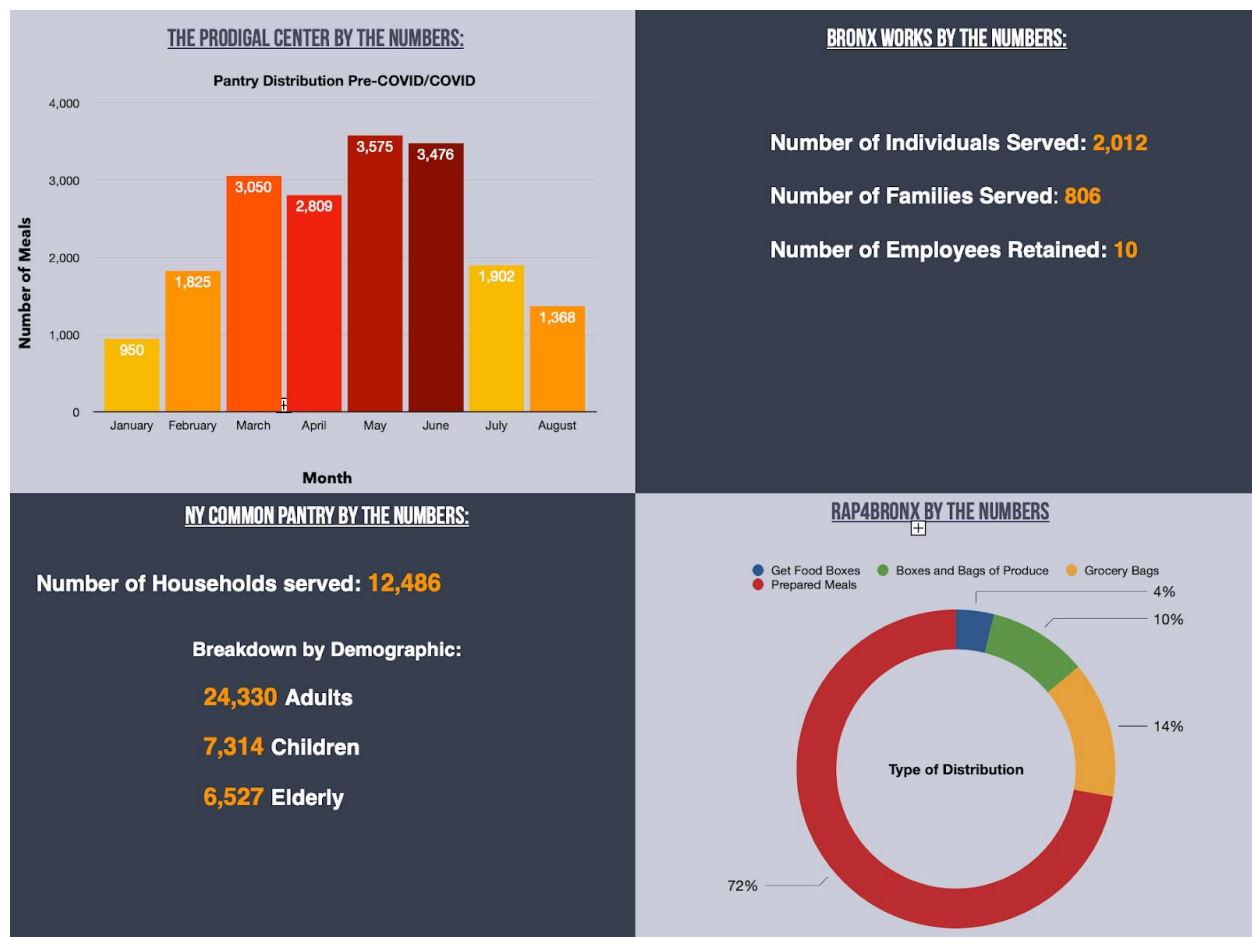


Figure 2: Data collected by anti-hunger organizations in the Bronx.

Source: The Thinkubator

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