

Eating Without Reservation

Ensuring Food Safety in New York City

APRIL 2019 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year more than 6,000 New York City residents are hospitalized for food-borne illnesses, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). In 2017, 3,287 suspected food poisoning cases were reported to 311 and the NYC DOHMH. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of these annual complaints to 311 increased by almost 20 percent.

In the United States, up to 48 million people contract foodborne illnesses every year about a third of which are caused by one of 31 known pathogens. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, foodborne illnesses cause on average 55,961 hospitalizations and 1,351 deaths per year. The 9.4 million foodborne illnesses caused by known pathogens cost the United States more than \$15.5 billion annually. These statistics raise several questions about food safety: How well do city, state and federal agencies protect New Yorkers from food-related illnesses? How has the level of food safety in New York City changed in the last decade? What are the emerging threats to food safety in New York City and the nation? What else could New York City do to better prevent food-borne illnesses?

In this report, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute summarizes available public evidence on these questions in order to engage health officials, policy makers, food justice advocates and eaters in a conversation on the state of food safety in New York City. Our goal is to provide information that can be used to ensure that New York City’s food safety system protects all New Yorkers against current and emerging threats to safe and healthy food. While other health professionals and scholars have written about specific dimensions of food safety in the city, no recent report has provided a comprehensive overview of the city’s food safety system, summarized the roles of city, state and federal governments, analyzed this complex system’s strengths and weaknesses, or made recommendations for meeting emerging needs, the gaps this report seeks to fill.

New York City has long been a national leader in defining the municipal role for ensuring access to safe and healthy food. Today, New York City has multiple programs and policies to protect food safety. The evidence summarized in this report suggests that city and state agencies take food safety seriously and act when they find a problem.

This report describes and celebrates these past and current accomplishments. It identifies eight emerging challenges as well as ways to address them.

1	Protecting New York City's vulnerable populations
2	Limiting chemical and other contaminants of food supply
3	Addressing globalization of food supply chains
4	Protecting New York City's food distribution system
5	Finding new uses of technology and Big Data to monitor and improve food safety
6	Promoting equity as a food safety system goal
7	Integrating food safety and chronic disease prevention
8	Responding to changing federal food and food safety policies

To meet these challenges, the report proposes recommendations for (1) actions that the City can pursue to develop a more robust system of food safety monitoring and risk assessment and (2) actions that will aid the development of a policy environment conducive to innovation and effective and equitable food safety policies, programs and practices.

Recommendations for Improved Assessment of Food Safety

1. Create an *Annual Report of Food-Borne Illness Outbreaks in New York City*, as proposed in a 2017 report by NYC DOHMH staff.¹ Together, the existing online restaurant inspection database and a summary annual food safety report will enable public officials, public health professionals, civil society groups and others to monitor progress towards reducing food-borne illnesses.
2. Hold City Council hearings to assess key food safety concerns among the public as well as elicit feedback and receive recommendations on current and prospective policies and programs led by New York City government.
3. Create a user-friendly public database of confirmed foodborne disease data in New York City, using publicly reported and other data as needed.
4. Convene a working group of representatives of city, state and federal agencies that monitor food-borne illnesses and food safety in New York City to identify duplication, gaps and opportunities for more effective collaboration on rapid and accurate assessment of food safety problems in New York City and improved methods for communicating findings to key actors.
5. Continue to collect and assess “big data” from social media as early warning of food safety problems and test effective public communications of this data.
6. Identify best and promising practices from other cities that could inform improvements of current systems and mechanisms for food safety planning and management in the city.

Recommendations for Policy Change

7. Provide consumers, public health professionals, policy makers and food stores and food service providers with an accessible and user-friendly one stop source

¹ Matis B, O'Halloran D, Stavinsky F, Wong M. Using the national environmental assessment reporting system to enhance foodborne illness outbreak investigations in New York city restaurants. *Journal of Environmental Health*. 2017 Apr 1;79(8):46

of relevant and timely information and data that can be used to monitor and improve food safety.

8. Integrate food safety and chronic diet-related disease prevention intervention activities in ways that extend the reach, magnify the impact, and improve the efficiency of current programs.
9. Set measurable targets for improving food safety conditions in New York City (e.g., drop in number of findings of rats) in food businesses and food-serving public Institutions and monitor progress towards goals.
10. Make promoting equity and protecting vulnerable populations a food safety priority.
11. Convene a working group of representatives of city, state and federal agencies that develop and enforce food-borne illnesses and food safety program and policies in New York City to identify duplication, gaps and opportunities for more effective collaboration on enforcement and prevention programs.
12. Support federal implementation of the recommendations of the U.S. Government Accountability Office to establish a government-wide performance plan for food safety and food safety monitoring as well as reinstate a centralized collaborative mechanism for federal agencies to craft common, broad-based food safety goals and objectives.

Finally, city, state and federal agencies, health professional organizations and food advocates need to do more to create mobilized constituencies that will support fair, effective and equitable food safety programs. Public opinion polls show strong public support for safe food,² but some public officials and public agencies, in order to minimize conflicts with the food industry, avoid speaking publicly about food safety. Our hope is that this report will contribute to a public discussion about what New York City and other levels of government can do to ensure that New York City remains a national leader in protecting the safety of its food.

Protecting the well-being of New York City's diverse population and its complex food system requires constant vigilance and periodic re-examination of established procedure. Better safe than sorry, that basic principle of public health, shows the value of a comprehensive assessment of the capacity of New York City's current food safety system to meet current and future challenges.

² FoodPrint. National Consumer Survey Results. 2018. Available from: <https://foodprint.org/what-is-foodprint/consumer-survey-results/>

Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations contributed to this report. Institute staff members who contributed to this report include Nevin Cohen, Craig Willingham, Jennifer Pinos, and Sarah Shapiro. We also thank for their helpful comments and their presentations at our [Forum on Food Safety in New York City](#) Dr. Urvashi Rangan, Chief Science Advisor, GRACE Communications Foundation; Corinne Schiff, Deputy Commissioner, Environmental Health Division at New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and her colleagues; John M. Luker, Assistant Director, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Division of Food Safety and Inspection; and Dr. Ann Charles Vegdahl, Extension Associate, Processing Authority, Cornell Food Venture Center, New York City. This report reflects the interpretations and opinions of its authors not our reviewers, funders, or employers.

Suggested citation

Wills A, Ilieva RT, Freudenberg N, *Eating Without Reservation: Ensuring Food Safety in New York City*. CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, New York, 2019.

About the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute is an academic research and action center at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy located in Harlem, NYC. The Institute provides evidence to inform municipal policies that promote equitable access to healthy, affordable food.