

# Food Policy in New York City Since 2008

*Lessons for the Next Decade*

SHORT VERSION



Released February 2018

### Acknowledgements

We thank the New York Community Trust and its Wilhelm Lowenstein Memorial Fund and Food Samaritan Fund for the support of this project. We also thank Molly Hartman, Kim Kessler, Lauren, Lindstrom, Cathy Nonas, Ashley Rafalow, Charmaine Ruddock, Ben Thomases, Jeremy Rivera, and Barbara Turk for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts. The opinions expressed here, and the accuracy of our facts are the responsibility of the authors and not our advisers or CUNY. Finally, we thank the CUNY Chancellor's Office and the Dean of the CUNY School of Public Health for their support of the Institute. The opinions and statements expressed here are the responsibility of the authors and not the institutions that employ us or the individuals who advised us.

### Other Versions

Two versions of this report are on line. This short version, a 30-40 minute read, for policy makers, advocates, students and others with an active interest in food policy, is available [here](#). The complete report, a longer version with an appendix, a 2 to 3 hour read for those for whom food policy is a major part of their professional, civic or intellectual responsibilities is available [here](#).

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute contributes evidence to solve food problems facing cities. This report is by Nicholas Freudenberg<sup>a</sup>, Nevin Cohen<sup>b</sup>, Jan Poppendieck<sup>c</sup> and Craig Willingham<sup>d</sup>.

Suggested citation for this report: Freudenberg N, Cohen N, Poppendieck J, Willingham C. *Food Policy in New York City Since 2008: Lessons for the Next Decade*. New York: CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, 2018.

This report is the second of a series of reports on food policy in New York City. Part 1 is available [here](#): Willingham C, Rafalow A, Lindstrom L, Freudenberg N. *The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute Guide to Food Governance in New York City*. CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, 2017.

<sup>a</sup> Distinguished Professor of Public Health, Director of CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute.

<sup>b</sup> Associate Professor of Health Policy, Research Director, Institute

<sup>c</sup> Senior Faculty Fellow, Institute, Professor Emerita of Sociology, Hunter College, CUNY

<sup>d</sup> Deputy Director of Institute

For more than a century, New York City has led the nation in using the authority and resources of municipal government to make healthy food, that most basic of human needs, more available, affordable, and safer for all city residents.

In the first decade of this century, New York and other cities throughout North America and Europe recognized that smart food policies could improve the health of the city, shrink economic inequality, and improve environmental conditions. During this period, New York City embarked on an ambitious effort to modify its food policies to attain these public goals.

New York City and New York State developed initiatives to reduce food insecurity, hunger, obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases. The initiatives also increase the potential for growth and sustainability of the city's growing food sector. Encouraged and pressured by a growing movement of health professionals, community leaders, and food and social justice advocates, the city and state governments proposed, enacted, and began to implement new food policies.



Image Credit:  
CUNY Urban Food  
Policy Institute

In this report, the City University of New York (CUNY) Urban Food Policy Institute takes stock of what has changed in food policy in New York City since 2008. We focus on the last decade because of the flurry of activity in this period and because we think impact may now be discernable. Our hope is to gain insights that can guide food policy in New York for the next ten years. The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, based at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, seeks to provide evidence that informs more equitable solutions to urban food problems in New York City and elsewhere.

*Food Policy in New York City Since 2008: Lessons for the Next Decade* seeks to answer five questions:

1. Among food policies proposed by New York City and State public officials over the last decade what are the strengths and weaknesses of their collective recommendations?
2. For food policies that the City Council began to monitor in 2011 via the annual Food Metrics Reports, what has been the success of implementation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this monitoring system?
3. More broadly, what do we know about the implementation and impact of major public food policies approved by New York City or State over the last decade?
4. As new policies were implemented, how have key nutrition and health indicators for the New York City population changed over the last decade? What do these changes show about the success and limitations of current food policies?
5. What lessons can public officials, health professional, food activists and community leaders learn from the food policy experiences of the last decade?

In this report, “food policy” refers to legislation, executive orders, rule changes, demonstration projects, programs, capital investments and budget allocations, reporting requirements, reports, planning documents, certifications and enforcement, and government agency rules and regulations. Together these decisions and their implementation constitute New York’s food policy landscape. Food policy emerges not just from government structures, but also reflects governance, the roles that civil society, businesses, communities, and residents play in shaping government responses to public problems. Our previous report, [The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute Guide to Food Governance in New York City](#), describes changes in food governance from 2008–2017.

## Sources and Methods

This report is based on a review of four publicly available sources of data.

### 1. *City and State Food Policy Reports.*

First, we identified all major reports on food and food policy prepared by New York City and State public officials or agencies between 2008 and 2017. We identified 20 documents, which we then reviewed to compile and classify reported recommendations. Some of these reports addressed only food; others made recommendations in other policy domains. Through this process, we listed 420 specific recommendations, which we categorized as seeking to achieve six broad goals (See Table 1) and 27 sub-goals. The six broad goals describe policies that improve nutritional well-being; promote food security; create food systems that support economic and community development; ensure sustainable food systems; support food workers; and strengthen food governance and food democracy.

### 2. *Food Metrics Reports.*

Second, we reviewed six annual Food Metrics Reports produced by the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy between 2012 and 2017. In 2011, the New York City Council passed Local Law 52 that established reporting requirements for a variety of city food initiatives. Since 2012, the annual Food Metrics Reports have provided a snapshot of data from those programs as well as the evidence needed to track trends over time. The report has expanded to include a broad range of City programs and initiatives to address food insecurity; improve New York City food procurement and food service; increase healthy food access and awareness, and support a more sustainable and just food system. We describe the findings, strengths and weaknesses of the Food Metrics Reports and examine changes that might make the metrics process more useful for improving food policy in New York.

### 3. *Top Forty Food Policies.*

To broaden our understanding of policies implemented beyond the limited number included in the Food Metrics

reports, we identified from the 20 public food policy reports, the Food Metrics Reports, and public and scientific reports on food policy in New York City since 2008 what we considered the most important city and state food policies implemented in the last decade. Although a few of these policies were initiated before 2008, we included only those that were substantially modified or expanded in the last decade. The policies selected were in our judgment proposed and enacted to contribute to the realization of one or more of the six broad food policy goals we identified; were designated as one of the decade's significant food policy accomplishment in one or more academic or other reports on food policy in New York; and some evidence was available on the implementation or evaluation status of this policy. Forty policies were identified that met these criteria.

4. *Health and social outcomes.*

We reviewed public data on five key health and social outcome indicators to analyze changes in New York City over the last decade. The five outcomes included: 1) fruit and vegetable consumption; 2) sugary beverage and soda consumption; 3) rates of obesity and overweight; 4) diagnoses of diabetes; and 5) the number of individuals meeting the USDA definition of being food insecure. These five outcomes were selected because public health professionals and policy makers identified improvements in these indicators as meaningful targets for policy. In addition, data are available over the period of interest, and a substantial body of evidence shows the pathways between improvements in these indicators and improvements in health. Because of our interest in food equity, where data are available comparing changes among different racial/ethnic or income groups, we present this evidence as well. Our analysis seeks to determine whether these indicators have been moving in the desired direction, not to attribute observed changes to any specific policy.

Each of our methods and sources of data has strengths and weaknesses, described in the full report. By using multiple sources of data, this approach provides a comprehensive overview of food policy change in New York in the last decade and overcomes some of the limitations of each individual source. Moreover, by weighing

the public evidence that is available now, rather than waiting for the evidence that can come only from more rigorous, lengthy—and expensive studies, we offer findings that can accelerate the process of developing food policy priorities for the next decade and inform future scientific studies on the impact of food policy in New York. Together the evidence presented in this report constitutes the most thorough analysis to date of the food policy landscape in New York City over the last 10 years.

**Findings**

Each source of data provides evidence to inform our understanding of the accomplishments and limitations of food policy initiatives of the last decade. Table 1 summarizes findings on the distribution of the six broad food policy goals that we used to classify recommendations and policy implementation across three

sources of data. Throughout the report, we assigned each policy recommendation or policy to one of the six primary policy goals listed in the first column of Table 1, using the language from the relevant policy document and our own judgment of the policy's main impact. We recognize that many policies contribute to two or more goals and in our discussion on outcomes and our recommendations we discuss these intersections.



Farmers Market in NYC  
Image Credit: Mina Pekovic found in FoodWorks: A Vision to Improve NYC's Food System 2010 report

Table 1 shows that one policy goal, improving nutritional well-being, has attracted the highest level of policy interest and action across the three sources we reviewed. Three other goals attracted moderate and approximately equal attention across sources (policies promoting food security, creating food systems that support economic and community development, and ensuring sustainable food systems). Two policy goals, supporting food workers and strengthening food governance and democracy attracted less attention across sources.

**Table 1. Distribution of Six Major Goals of Food Policy in New York City Across Sources**

Policy Goal	Source	20 Public Reports (% of 420 recommendations)	Food Metrics (% of 37 indicators)	Top 40 (% of 40 policies)
1. Improve nutritional well-being. Policies that promote health and reduce diet-related diseases		25%	50%	37%
2. Promote food security. Policies that reduce hunger and food insecurity and provide the quality and quantity of food needed to maintain health		13%	15%	22%
3. Create food systems that support economic & community development. Policies that promote community economic development through food and improve food production and distribution in region		28%	10%	15%
4. Ensure sustainable food systems. Policies that reduce food waste and food-related pollution and carbon emissions and protect the region's farmland		26%	20%	10%
5. Support Food Workers. Policies that provide food workers with decent wages and benefits, safe working conditions and the right to organize		4%	5%	8%
6. Strengthen food governance and food democracy. Policies that encourage civic engagement in shaping food policy and reduce the influence of special interests		4%	0	8%

*City and State Food Policy Reports*

These 20 reports, shown in Table 2, constitute a valuable inventory of the accumulated food policy recommendations made by city and state officials over the past decade. Together they show that policy makers, inspired in part by the emerging local and national food movements, have generated a multitude of proposals for improving local food environments. The 420 recommendations show that lack of policy ideas is not the problem facing New York City.

**Table 2 Major Public Reports on Food Policy Prepared by New York City and State Officials, 2008-2017**

Policy Document	Date
New York State Council on Food Policy (NYSCFP), 5 Annual Reports to the Governor (5 Annual Reports, of which 3 include recommendations)	2000-2013
Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage	2008
Food in the Public Interest How New York City's Food Policy Holds the Key to Hunger, Health, Jobs and the Environment	2009
FoodWorks: A Vision to Improve NYC's Food System	2010
Food NYC: A Blueprint for a Sustainable Food System	2010
PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York	2011
Reversing the Epidemic: The New York City Obesity Task Force Plan to Prevent and Control Obesity	2012
Childhood Obesity: Mitigation and Prevention in the State of New York	2013
Report on Co-Packing for Brooklyn Food Manufacturers	2013
How Our Gardens Grow: Strategies for Expanding Urban Agriculture	2015
OneNYC: The Plan for a Strong and Just City	2015
New York State-New York City Regional Food Hubs Task Force Final Action Plan	2016
Five Borough Food Flow	2016
NextGeneration NYCHA	2016
Built to Lead, 2016 State of the State	2016
Manhattan Supermarkets: How to Keep Them Alive	2017

Our review of these documents shows that many constituencies play a role in shaping food policy. But given the multiple influences on food policy, policy makers and advocates would benefit from bringing voices of the public and additional technical and content expertise more fully into the policy-making process. Other constituencies to include in the policy process are community leaders and residents, urban planners, workforce developers, agricultural specialists, educators, and health professionals.

While we recognize and laud the growing concern about food insecurity among city and state public officials and food advocates, our review of the reports and recommendations suggest that further integration of the goals and strategies for improving nutritional well-being and reducing food insecurity would benefit a wide cross-section of New Yorkers. In the past, improving food security and enhancing nutrition were viewed as separate goals, attended to by different city and state agencies. As food insecurity and diet-related diseases associated with over-consumption of unhealthy food become concentrated in low-income populations, developing and implementing policies that create local food environments that simultaneously reduce these two indicators of growing inequality are food policy priorities.

In practice, the six goals we identified reinforce each other. Elucidating the connections between reducing food insecurity, improving nutritional well-being, creating food systems that support economic and community development, and protecting food workers may help to re-balance priorities. Ending hunger and persistent food insecurity in New York is a feasible goal that will require policy makers and advocates to concentrate their attention on root causes.

Another policy goal that requires additional attention is supporting food workers. A food system that depends on low wage labor, that fails to protect the health and safety of its workers, and in which many food workers are themselves food insecure is not sustainable or moral. This issue has received growing attention from city and state policy makers and advocates, but more progress is achievable and needed.

The lack of attention to food policy governance and food democracy constitutes a weakness of the body of recommendations we identified. The emphasis on enacting meaningful policies that lead to concrete improvements in food systems and food environments is sometimes used as a rationale for focusing on content rather than process. While

we share the desire for timely results, failure to develop formal and informal processes for rational food policy-making puts the entire enterprise at risk. This is especially true during transitional periods like changes in administrations. The current dismantling of food policies in Washington illustrates this danger. By fully engaging in the policy process those who experience directly the harms of our current food system, policy makers and advocates can benefit from powerful new constituencies for effective reform. These problems of democracy affect



Refrigerated City Harvest trucks help deliver fresh produce to community food programs throughout New York City.

Image Credit:  
City Harvest  
(CC BY-SA 3.0)

other urban sectors such as housing and education. Using food policy to promote democratic reforms has the potential to mobilize diverse constituencies now often excluded from the policy process.

### Food Metrics Reports

The Food Metrics Reports provide valuable data for understanding the implementation of city food initiatives. They provide the most comprehensive compendium of food data published by the city and provide important evidence for an assessment of progress in implementing selected food policies approved in New York City and State over the last decade. As such, the Food Metrics Reports are an important step forward in food policy planning. The Reports show measurable progress on about 50% of the indicators and provide assurance that a bare majority of the selected measures of implementation of food initiatives are moving in the right direction.

But the reporting process could be more useful to food planning in several ways. The reports could include more data, presented in ways that more clearly show progress or setbacks. The reports could disaggregate data geographically to enable communities to identify local problems and advocate for solutions. In addition, the reports could be presented through platforms such as New York City Open Data, a site that makes city data more widely available. This could facilitate further analyses and visualization by other public

agencies, academics, and advocates.

Most of the metrics chosen are outputs, not outcomes, making the reports of limited value in determining whether public food policies and programs are making a difference. The heavy reliance on quantitative data limits policy makers and advocates from understanding why changes have or have not occurred.

Although the Mayor's Office of Food Policy has primary responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and reporting on food metrics, it is not reasonable for a small office with limited staff to have sole responsibility for this substantial effort. Thus, it makes sense both to increase resources for this office and to ask what other city and state agencies, nonprofit organizations, food justice groups, and academics can do to strengthen the Food Metrics Reports and enhance their contribution to improved food policy. In addition, the city and state collect many other sources of data that could be used to monitor implementation of food policy, e.g., the Mayor's Management Reports and Community Health Surveys, that could also be incorporated into annual food reports.

*Top Forty Food Policies*

How well have the 40 city and state policies selected for review and shown in Table 3 contributed to achieving the six broad food policy goals?



1. *Improve nutritional well-being.*

The 15 policies in this area improved access to healthy food in low-income communities (Healthy Bodegas and Shop Healthy NYC!, FRESH, Green Carts); improved the quality and healthfulness of the New York City’s institutional food programs (salad bars and water jets in schools, NYC Food Standards, Garden to Café and Grow to Learn in Schools, Fruit and Vegetable Prescriptions in city hospitals); and discouraged consumption of unhealthy food (bans on trans fats, salt reduction, limits on sugary drinks in child care and other settings, calorie and salt labeling in chain restaurants, and New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) media campaigns. These 15 policies and programs reinforce each other and support several of the other food policy goals, including promoting food security and promoting community and economic development. All 15 nutrition policies report some data on implementation, either through the Food Metrics Reports, DOHMH reports, or scientific papers. Some data are available on the impact of the programs on food quality, diet, or health behaviors for 10 of the 15 policies. For the most part, these evaluation studies are modest in scale and methodological rigor.

In our view, these policies and programs have not been designed or to date implemented on a scale likely to lead to meaningful changes in nutritional health for New York City’s population. On the design side, political and organizational barriers often prevent the program or policy from realizing its full potential. For example, only a third of Green Carts authorized are in operation and infrastructure problems such as where to store carts have not been solved, discouraging vendor participation. The number of stores opened by FRESH are far fewer than the number that have closed in targeted neighborhoods in the same period. Public spending on discouraging unhealthy food consumption is a tiny fraction of what the food industry spends in New York City to persuade consumers to use more of the ultra-processed products clearly associated with diet-related chronic diseases. In addition, the hypothesis that making healthy food more available and unhealthy food less available will itself lead to changes in diet requires further empirical investigation.

On the one hand, these limitations point to the challenge of transforming food environments and reversing the many diet-related health conditions that burden New York City residents and drive inequalities in health. On the other hand, the accomplishments to date in improving food environments to support better nutrition

**Table 3 Forty Significant Food Policies Implemented in New York City in the Last Decade\***

Policy Action	Year Enacted/Implemented
<b>1. Improve nutritional well-being</b> Policies that promote health and reduce diet-related diseases	
Launched Healthy Bodegas/Shop Healthy NYC! Program	Announced in 2006, and pilot tested in 2007, this initiative has been modified and expanded throughout the decade and was renamed as Shop Healthy NYC! in 2012
Expanded number of salad bars in NYC public schools	New salad bars began to be opened in NYC schools in 2005, but were significantly expanded after the 2012 Mayor’s Task Force on Obesity, which recommended expanding to all NYC public schools
Limited sugary drinks in child care centers (amendment to NYC Health Code Article 47)	2007–Extended to summer camps in 2012
Banned artificial trans fat in NYC restaurants (amendment to NYC Health Code Article 81)	2007
Installed water jets in many NYC public schools	2008
Established 1,000 permits for Green Carts (Local Law 9)	2008–Began providing support to equip vendors with EBT machines in 2010
Required chain restaurants to post calorie information on menus/menu boards (amendment to NYC Health Code Article 81)	2008–Updated requirements in 2015 (with enforcement beginning in 2017)
Piloted Garden to Café program in 20 New York City public schools	2008–Expanded program since its inception
Launched the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) program	2009
NYC DOHMH ran several media campaigns to discourage consumption of unhealthy food	2009-2017
Established National Salt Reduction Initiative, a voluntary partnership initiated by NYC DOHMH	2009
Launched Grow to Learn NYC initiative	2011–Expanded to become a citywide school gardening initiative

CONTINUED >

Launched Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Pilot program at city hospitals	2013–Expanding to additional sites with 2016 funding from USDA
Required sodium warning labels on chain restaurant menus	2015–Enforcement began in 2016
<b>2. Promote food security</b> Policies that reduce hunger and food insecurity and provide the quality and quantity of food needed to maintain health	
Launched Health Bucks Program	2005–Expanded to all NYC farmers markets in 2012; expanded to a year-round program in 2016 with USDA funding
Launched Food Stamp Paperless Office System	2007
NY State expanded SNAP eligibility and extended recertification	2008-2016
Implemented online application for NYC public school meal programs	2008
Opened SNAP call centers	2009
NY State ended requirement for finger imaging for SNAP	2012
Created the New York City Food Assistance Collaborative	2014
Began rollout to expand the Breakfast in the Classroom program in NYC public schools	2015
Implemented universal free school lunch in most New York City middle schools	2014–Expanded to most New York City public schools in 2017
<b>3. Create food systems that support economic development</b> Policies that promote community economic development through food and improved food production and distribution in region	
Extended the license agreement for city community gardens	2011
Local Food Procurement Guidelines for NYC Agencies (Local Law 50)	2011
Launched New York City Housing Authority's first large-scale urban farm	2013–Established the Farms at NYCHA program in 2016
Invested \$150 million to revitalize the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market	2015
Invested \$15 million in the development of Greenmarket Regional Food Hub at Hunts Point	2016

CONTINUED >

<b>4. Ensure sustainable food systems</b> Policies that reduce food waste and food-related pollution and carbon emissions and protect region's farmland	
Supported preservation of farms in New York City watershed through the Watershed Agricultural Program	Founded in 1992, but expanded considerably between 2012 and 2016.
Launched the Food Waste Challenge	2013
Established a compost pilot program for curbside collection of organic waste (Local Law 77)	2013–Expanded program in 2017
Launched the NYC Mayor's Zero Waste Challenge	2016
Required heating oil sold or used by the City to contain a percentage of biodiesel (Local Law 119)	2016
<b>5. Support food workers</b> Policies that provide food workers with decent wages and benefits, safe working conditions, and the right to organize	
Increased the minimum wage	2015
Protected employees in large grocery stores from immediately losing their jobs after an ownership transition (Local Law 11)	2016
Protected fast food workers from unpredictable scheduling and payment (the Fair Work Week legislative package: Local Laws 98, 99, 100, 106, 107)	2016-17
<b>6. Strengthen food governance and food democracy</b> Policies that encourage civic engagement in shaping food policy and reduce the influence of special interests	
Established New York State Food Policy Council	2007–Renewed in 2011
Established first Food Policy Coordinator position in Mayor's Office in 2008	2008–Renamed as the Office of the Director of Food Policy in 2014
Required annual Food Metrics Reports (Local Law 52)	2011

show that city and state governments can implement policies that could lead to improvements in health. To achieve that goal, these policies need to be brought to scale, sustained, and design problems encountered in early implementation need to be at least partially solved.

Many sectors of the population appear to support policies that make healthier food more accessible and affordable. From a public health perspective, the most significant impact of the city policies implemented to improve nutritional well-being in the last decade may be that the municipal government has demonstrated that it can take on new roles in improving local food environments and making healthy food more accessible. Implementing these changes on a scale and with the intensity, duration, and commitment needed to bring about changes in health remains a challenge for the next decade.



### 2. Promote food security.

The nine policies in this area subsidized healthy food consumption (Health Bucks), facilitated enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (with changes in various city and state enrollment and eligibility practices); improved access to free breakfast and lunch for New York City school children; and strengthened the capacity of emergency food providers. Lead city agencies were New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Education, again supported and monitored by the Mayor's Office of Food Policy. Non-profit advocacy organizations such as Food Bank for New York City, City Harvest, Hunger Free America (formerly the NYC Coalition Against Hunger), Community Food Advocates and the Hunger Action Network of New York State played key roles in keeping city and state government focused on this issue and willing to innovate.

Several of the policies implemented to enhance SNAP enrollment were the result of changes in internal organizational practices at HRA. These systems reduced waiting time at SNAP offices and facilitated enrollment by many families, showing that some changes in the practices of public agencies can occur without legislative action and out of the spotlight of media and public attention.

Eight of the nine food security policies have some implementation data; only two report data on health or consumption impact. A variety of data on receipt of public food benefits is available, but few studies assess the impact of administrative changes in outreach, enrollment or recertification on enrollment, participation, or the prevalence of hunger or food security in various populations. Annual reports on the Meal Gap or the number of people served in emergency food programs released by anti-hunger advocacy and service organizations provide proxy measures of need.



### 3. Create food systems that support economic and community development.

Implementation of the five policies in this area have 1) increased the number of community gardens and farms in New York City; 2) increased the amount of New York State food served in city institutions, thus creating additional markets for farmers in the state; and 3) improved the food distribution infrastructure at Hunts Point and in the South Bronx, investments that have the potential to make healthy food more available. These important changes have attracted public support for the development of alternative food models for New York City.

However, many of the problematic characteristics of New York City's food system identified by policy experts have scarcely been addressed. These include heavy reliance for our food supply on national food companies that still sell mostly processed food associated with chronic diseases. Furthermore, the city's food distribution system relies heavily on trucks, a mode of transportation that pollutes and adds costs to the city's food. There is also a lack of support for small businesses that would allow them to overcome perceived obstacles such as high rent and burdensome regulations. Throughout the city, gentrification is threatening access to healthy affordable food, as well as affordable housing.

New York City has provided some implementation data on four of the six policies in this category. To our knowledge, none have been evaluated for impact on our food economy or nutritional well-being.



4. *Ensure sustainable food systems.*

The five policies in this area contributed to increased preservation of upstate farmland and initiated several programs to reduce food waste. To preserve the quality of its source water, the City's Department of Environmental Protection, created the Watershed Agricultural Council, which in partnership with other organizations, carries out a voluntary Watershed Agricultural Program that encourages New York State farmers to use agricultural best management practices. Since 1992, the program has worked with more than 440 farms in both the Catskill/Delaware and Croton Watersheds. Between 2012 and 2016, the Council added 358 farms, more than quadrupling the number of farms involved.



Image Credit:  
New York City  
Department  
of Sanitation  
Twitter Page

The three food waste programs play an important role in showing that city government can act to reduce waste and enlist some portion of businesses and residents in participating in these efforts. To date, these programs have operated at a relatively modest scale; significant expansion will be necessary to achieve meaningful reductions in the city's food waste. The available data suggests that these programs are being implemented, but more years of

data will be needed to track progress. Curbside composting reached 1 million people by early 2017 and is expected to reach 2 million by the end of 2017.

Several policies in other categories also contribute to this goal. The city's food procurement guidelines have increased the proportion of local and regional food served in municipal institutional food programs. The expansion of farmers markets in the city has created new demand for the region's farmers. Both actions reduce the number of food miles needed to bring food to New York City, thus potentially reducing pollution and the carbon emissions that contribute to global warming.

The most significant obstacle to ensuring more sustainable food systems is that to date New York City and State and the regional food shed lack a comprehensive food or agricultural plan. Developing such plans is an essential prerequisite for identifying and filling policy gaps that enhance sustainability.



5. *Support food workers.*

Three policies on the list support low wage food workers. A variety of city and state policies have increased minimum wages, first for fast food and tipped workers and then for all workers. By the end of 2019, all city workers will have a minimum wage of \$15. A second city law, approved in 2016, protects workers in large grocery stores from losing their jobs after an ownership transition. In 2017, the City Council passed, and the Mayor signed a new law ensuring that fast food and other retail workers will have fair notification of their work hours and predictable schedules for paychecks. It is estimated that 65,000 workers in New York City will be protected by these laws. To our knowledge, no data are yet available on the implementation or impact of these laws.

In sum, the last three years have seen increased policy action to protect food workers, a marker of successful efforts by worker organizations to put this issue on the city, state, and nation's policy agenda. In addition to the growing local and national attention to adverse consequences of income inequality and low wage labor. The ultimate impact of these new laws on the lives and working conditions of low wage food workers will depend on full implementation and vigorous enforcement.



6. *Strengthen food governance and democracy.*

Three policies were identified that contributed to strengthening food governance and food democracy. These included the establishment of the New York State Food Policy Council in 2007, later renamed the New York State Council on Hunger and Food Policy; the establishment of the food policy coordinator's position in the Office of the Mayor of New York City in 2008; and the 2011 City Council law requiring preparation of annual Food Metrics Reports. Of note, no major new city or state policies supporting improved food governance or food democracy have been enacted in the last six years.

Each of these three measures has made important contributions. The State Food Policy Council has served as a platform for convening state officials and others concerned about food policy and for engaging diverse constituencies in an ongoing dialogue of food policy. One independent assessment of the Council was prepared

in 2013 by the Hunger Action Network of New York State. While acknowledging the value of the forum, Hunger Action Network of New York State concluded that the Council failed to fully implement charges from the Executive Order. Whether this assessment is justified deserves further discussion among the Council, its constituencies, and critics. The assessment does show the value of independent assessments to monitor the performance of various food policy governance mechanisms.

While no independent or government reports are available on the functioning of New York City's Food Policy Coordinator, the Office of the Food Policy Coordinator/Director has created a focal point for food policy in the Office of the Mayor and has helped focus attention on food within that office. More city agencies now appear to be engaged in food policy than prior to 2007 and their officials are more likely to talk to each other and coordinate efforts. In addition, the position has served as an entry point for advocates, elected officials, and others to bring concerns and suggestions about food policy to the Office of the Mayor.

Over the last decade, the Office has expanded its scope of interest to include food retail operations in the city, the environmental impact of our food system, food waste, and food as an economic development strategy. However, the Office is inadequately funded to fully achieve its mission. New York City spends far less on monitoring and coordinating food policy, a vital sector of the city's economy, than it does on monitoring, for example, policing, education, housing or health care. The Office of the Food Policy Coordinator/Director is a result of a Mayoral Executive Order, not a law, and is thus vulnerable to termination at the whim of future Mayors.

In the future, independent assessments of these governance mechanisms could help to improve their functioning and enhance their impact. In addition, many of the larger governance problems facing New York City and State—for example, low voter turnout, public corruption, ongoing conflicts between the Mayor and Governor, difficulty in implementing and enforcing new ethics standards, and few civil society groups that credibly speak for under-represented populations—also hamper progress in expanding food democracy and improving food governance. Tackling these deep-seated problems will contribute to improved food policies.

### *Health and social outcomes*

Our review of changes in five key health and social outcomes over the last decade or so showed at best small increases in daily fruit and vegetable consumption, some reductions in sugary beverage consumption, persistently high rates of obesity and overweight with stable or widening inequitable distribution by race and ethnicity, modest increases in the proportion of New Yorkers ever diagnosed with diabetes, and modest recent declines in the number and percentages of New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity.

Several possible hypotheses may explain these mostly disappointing results. First, it is possible that absent the policies or programs described in this report, these indicators would have been much worse.

Second, it may be that these policies and programs have not yet realized their full potential. In this scenario, if policy makers and city and state government persist with these initiatives, in the next decade the targeted outcomes will begin to change for the better.

Third, it is possible that the policies and programs described in this report have not been implemented with the intensity, duration, or population impact needed to bring about changes in complex and deeply rooted outcomes. This hypothesis suggests the need for mid-course corrections that strengthen, intensify and expand successful approaches.

Fourth, perhaps the wrong policies and programs have been implemented. By choosing incremental, mostly modest programs perhaps New York has missed an opportunity to create the innovative and transformative changes needed to address the deeper cause of New York City's food-related problems. This explanation would require policy makers and advocates to go back to the drawing board and design new approaches to food change.

Finally, it may be that the most important determinants of diet-related diseases: food insecurity, poor working conditions for low wage workers, and unsustainable food and farm practices do not operate primarily at the municipal or state level. Thus, what may be needed to achieve the desired changes in outcomes are national or global reforms of our food system.

While these explanations are not mutually exclusive, they do suggest different directions for policy and practice. More empirical research is urgently needed to better understand which combination of these explanations best clarifies next steps. In the next section we propose a few studies that could help to clarify options for policy-relevant research. New York City cannot afford to wait for the evidence these studies produce; rather, policy makers, public officials, researchers and advocates will need to use the ample evidence now available to act. The unacceptable outcome would be that five to ten years from now, we will still be lamenting the limited progress on key indicators of healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems.

## Conclusion

In the last decade, New York City became a national and international leader in using the capacity, power, resources and authority of local government to improve food environments. As this report shows, New York City and State officials have produced a rich portfolio of policy recommendations. The city has created a system for monitoring implementation of key policies and producing public reports that allow interested observers to monitor progress. Our review of programs and policies implemented (The Top 40) shows that for each of the six broad goals of food policy, several policies and programs have been implemented and at least some have reported measurable progress. Perhaps the city's most impressive accomplishments are that food policy is now on the agenda of city and state officials, constituencies inside and outside the government are mobilized to monitor a variety of food policies and to advocate for change as needed, and many more New Yorkers are convinced that getting food policy right is an essential task for assuring the future of the city's health, economy, environment, and commitment to fairness.

But as this report also shows, New York City has not yet seen substantial progress on key food indicators that threaten the city's future. Despite unprecedented action to address the city's food problems, most of the hundreds of city, state, civil society and commercial food initiatives now in progress are poorly or not at all coordinated, leading to duplication of effort, unaddressed problems and neglected populations, reinvention of wheels, and sometimes chaotic implementation. Despite the substantial efforts to document and evaluate the many food initiatives now underway, for the most part we have little information on what is working and not working and what is the collective impact of our multiple efforts.

Despite the city's and state's new food policy governance bodies, most New Yorkers still have few opportunities to participate in shaping their local food environments.

Our recommendations suggest some possible directions for addressing these half-full, half empty findings. In making these suggestions we are aware of our limitations. We are academics and advocates, not policy makers or elected officials. We have the luxury and privilege of critical analysis without the responsibility of implementation. In recognition of that role, our goal is to

spark conversations and encourage dialogue so that together all those who depend on New York City’s food system can find ways to make that system more fair, effective, sustainable, and thus contribute to our city’s future.

**Recommendations**

**I** *Create a New York City Food Plan.*  
 Lewis Carroll once said, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” The problem in New York City is that there are too many goals and no clear policy agenda or strategic plan. Without such a plan, it is difficult to monitor progress or identify problems or opportunities. In the coming years, New York City should develop a formal multi-year food plan with specific goals and defined strategies for achieving these goals. Several cities have developed such plans including Los Angeles, Chicago, London, Toronto, and others that offer useful starting points for New York City. One possible route would be to embed the city’s Food Plan in the Mayor’s larger OneNYC equity agenda, a way to link improvements in food with those in housing, education and other sectors.

**II** *Identify key outcomes and metrics for key food policy goals.*  
 In our view, New York City Food Policy’s annual Food Metrics Reports have been a good step forward and have established a firm foundation for monitoring food policy across city agencies. But as we noted, they have several shortcomings.

Table 4 suggests possible long-term outcomes for the six broad food policy goals that New York City is pursuing and identifies possible metrics for assessing progress towards these goals. We recommend including some broad social outcomes to emphasize the impact of non-food policies on food outcomes. Our aim is to spark discussion among policy makers, public officials, academics, and advocates. We propose that by the end of 2018, in collaboration with those developing the New York City Food Plan, a working group should propose Food Policy Metrics 2.0—a set of outcomes and metrics, including many already collected by other city and state agencies that could add to the food policy monitoring process.

Table 4 Outcomes and Metrics for Key Food Policy Goals		
Policy Goal	Desired Long-Term Outcomes	Possible Metrics
Improve nutritional well-being	Reduced prevalence and geographic and social inequalities in diet-related diseases, increased longevity, decreased preventable hospitalizations, and ER visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rates of diet related diseases</li> <li>Hospital admission rates</li> <li>Number of ER visits</li> </ul>
Promote food security	Reduced hunger and food insecurity, lower prevalence of conditions due to under-nutrition, increased productivity and academic achievement, reduced poverty and dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number and % of food insecure households overall and by population</li> <li>Poverty rates</li> <li>% population earning below “living wage”</li> <li>High school graduation rates</li> <li>Unemployment rates</li> <li>Food prices</li> </ul>
Create food systems that support economic development	Increased employment, increased number of jobs and wages for food workers that pay decent wages and offer benefits, increased self-sufficiency, reduced dependence at household and neighborhood levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unemployment rates</li> <li>Food worker wages</li> <li>Income inequality</li> <li>% of those eligible for benefits enrolled</li> </ul>
Ensure sustainable food systems	Reduced carbon emissions and fewer adverse effects of climate change, less food waste, fewer unnecessary food miles, reduced pollution of water, soil, and air.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number and % of truck traffic into NYC</li> <li>Volume of organics going into landfills</li> <li>Volume of soil pollutants</li> <li>Volume of air pollutants</li> </ul>
Protect food workers	Improved pay and working conditions for food workers, reduced income inequality, and improved food safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measures of income and benefits of food workers</li> <li>Rates of workplace accidents</li> <li>Career and salary trajectories of food workers</li> </ul>

CONTINUED >

<p>Promote food democracy</p>	<p>More democratic and civic participation, less inequality, more residents have a voice in shaping local food environments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of groups or residents participating in decision making about local and municipal food environments; impact of their participation on quality and perception of decisions</li> <li>• Spending on lobbying and campaign contributions from special interest groups seeking to influence food policy</li> </ul>
-------------------------------	---	---

**III** *Focus New York City food policies and programs more explicitly on reducing inequities in food-related outcomes.*

Our inability to reduce the wide socioeconomic and racial/ethnic inequalities in food-related outcomes in New York City over the last decade is one of the most disturbing findings from this assessment of food policies. In Mayor de Blasio’s 2013 campaign and in his 2015 One NYC Plan, he articulated a vision and made specific commitments to reducing inequality in New York City. His second term provides the Mayor, the City Council, advocates, and civil society organizations with an opportunity to translate this commitment into specific policies and plans that will reduce inequitable access to food and inequitable distribution of adverse health outcomes such as diabetes, food insecurity, and low wages for food workers.

This will require the expansion and improvement of both food policies, e.g., further improvements in institutional food, a nutritional safety net for vulnerable populations, and non-food policies such as more affordable housing, higher wages and more benefits for low-income workers, and improved educational opportunities from pre-school to college. The most fundamental strategy for improving the health and social outcomes associated with food in New York City is to reduce the prevalence and adverse consequences of poverty and inequality. Calling attention to the intimate links between poverty and diet is a first step towards developing more effective long-term policies.

By making reductions in the current socioeconomic and racial/ethnic inequitable distribution of the five outcomes reviewed in Part

4 (fruit and vegetable and soda consumption, obesity, diabetes, and food insecurity) a political priority, New York City policy makers can contribute to reducing the food aspects of the problem that most threatens New York City’s future —continuing high rates of poverty and widening gaps in income inequality.

**IV** *Strengthen New York City’s public sector in food.*

In our view, the greatest food policy accomplishment of Mayors Michael Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio, the City Council, state government and New York City’s emerging food justice movement is the strengthening of New York’s public sector in food. The New York City Food Standards, Universal Free School Lunch, Green Carts, FRESH, calorie labeling, the trans fat ban, facilitating enrollment in SNAP and WIC, higher minimum wages for fast food workers—all are example of New York’s municipal and state governments using their power to improve our food system.

Despite these accomplishments, conventional wisdom still holds that our food system operates almost wholly in the market sector and that there is no alternative to having giant food companies make most decisions about who gets to eat what. In fact, the United States —and especially New York City—have a robust public sector in food. It includes SNAP and WIC, multi-billion-dollar programs in New York City alone; school food, hospital food, jail food, child care food, and other public institutional food programs. This also extends to local, state, and national subsidies and tax breaks for food growers and sellers; and the food safety system that includes restaurant and store inspections.

While no one has quantified the full scope of public spending on food in New York City, tax payer dollars, and government workers touch a significant proportion of the food we consume. The problem is that public food programs are distributed among several levels and branches of government and few policy makers have focused on how to use the cumulative power of the public food system to achieve public goals such as reducing hunger, preventing diabetes, or protecting low wage food workers.

By making a systematic effort to map, analyze, and improve the public sector in food, New York City can identify specific ways that municipal and state government, in partnership with other

constituencies, can use the power of this sector to realize the goals articulated in the proposed New York City Food Plan. Some specific ways that city and state government could use their authority to improve the food public sector include:

- Strengthen the New York City Food Standards and apply them to more public institutions such as all hospitals, City University of New York, and more publicly funded non-profits.
- Strengthen the city's food procurement rules to better leverage market power for improved nutrition, support regional farmers more substantially, and protect food workers who produce for the public sector.
- Create city and state funded public food assistance programs that serve all immigrants, regardless of documentation status. In New York City, documentation status should not force people to go hungry.
- End promotion of unhealthy foods such as soda, fast food and high sugar, fat and salt snacks in all city-owned or supported facilities. The ubiquity of unhealthy food that drives epidemics of diet-related diseases and encourages consumption, sends a message that this food is acceptable. By using its existing authority to set rules about what can be sold or marketed in public spaces, New York City can contribute to reducing unhealthy food consumption.

Food policy advocates can craft these and other suggestions into a systematic plan to strengthen New York City's public sector in food. By focusing its authority, the city can accelerate progress towards goals, coordinate multiple initiatives, achieve synergies in now mostly separate programs, and build popular support for policies that make healthy food choices easy choices.

By uniting New Yorkers in support of a strong public sector in food, policy makers, and advocates also create a policy and political rationale to challenge another significant threat to the city's food future, the ideological belief that markets know best. In fact, New York City's most serious threats to health are a consequence of market failures of a national food system that cannot make healthy affordable food accessible to all Americans. Furthermore, the market depends on profits from aggressive marketing of products associated with premature death and preventable illnesses. A stronger public

sector in food is the antidote to these market failures. New York City can lead the nation in testing new approaches to strengthening its public sector in food.



#### **Create new democracy and governance processes.**

In the last decade, city and state government have created new ways to coordinate and plan food policy, including the establishment of the Food Policy Coordinator in the Mayor's Office in 2007 and the creation of the New York State Food Policy Council in 2007, later reconstituted as the New York State Council on Hunger and Food Policy. In addition, food policy advocates and community residents in New York City have used established and new mechanisms to participate in shaping policy. These include public forums and reports, city council and community board hearings, participatory budgeting, lobbying and advocacy, demonstrations, and lawsuits.

Compared to a decade ago, it seems clear that today more elected officials, more advocates, and more New York residents participate in shaping food policy, an important indicator of progress. Among the political outcomes of this higher level of participation, we believe, are the implementation of public policies and programs like the Green Carts, Universal Free Lunch in city schools, removal of some barriers to SNAP enrollment, higher minimum wages, Health Bucks, and the expanded use of EBTs in farmers markets.

The emergence of a New York City food policy advocacy coalition that includes elected officials, community leaders, and advocacy organizations increases the chances that food policy will continue to make progress in the coming decade. Even though the coalition is sometimes fragmented and has not yet developed a coherent policy agenda, its very existence is a big step forward for food policy in New York City.

Despite these accomplishments, food policy governance faces some daunting challenges. One solution is to strengthen the Office of Food Policy Director by: 1) making the role a charter-established position; 2) funding the office adequately to achieve its mission; and 3) creating various mechanisms for more active community and resident participation.

As President Trump and Congress roll back many of the advances

in federal food policies, new or strengthened national coalitions to defend these programs will be needed. In previous years, New York City created robust coalitions that exerted influence on the two major pieces of federal legislation that shape food policy in New York City and the nation: The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, last renewed in 2010 and extended yearly since 2016; and the Farm Bill, scheduled for re-authorization in 2018. Creating even stronger and more powerful coalitions is a high priority for 2018, given the national threats to these two programs.

As yet no organization or coalition speaks authoritatively and credibly for the vast constituencies most adversely affected by New York City's food system. These include food insecure and hungry New Yorkers, individuals and families affected by diabetes and other diet-related diseases, low wage food workers who do not earn enough to feed their own families, immigrants who are losing access to even the meager food benefits for which they were eligible, and residents of gentrifying neighborhoods where healthy affordable food is becoming harder to find. Although these groups may constitute most New Yorkers, they still lack any organized voice in food policy governance. The many professional groups and coalitions doing work in the various sectors of food policy such as food insecurity, obesity, urban agriculture, or school food act vigorously to advocate for better policies, but for the most part cannot speak with or for these other constituencies.

Special interests such as the soda and sugary beverage industry, operators of big supermarkets, real estate developers and the ultra-wealthy continue to oppose food, housing, and tax policies that could contribute to more effective and just food policies. In efforts to tax soda, limit soda portion size, or create more affordable housing, these interests have successfully blocked city and state policy initiatives. The failure of city and state governments to act forcefully to reduce conflicts of interest, reform campaign financing, or limit the influence of lobbyists leaves many residents mistrustful or cynical, discouraging their participation in campaigns to improve food or other policies.

Many of the mechanisms for citizen participation that do exist, from participatory budgeting, testifying at community boards or city council hearings, writing letters or meeting with legislators often appear to be more symbolic than real. At best, these processes influence policy only at the margins, with the meaningful decisions made behind closed doors.

The decline of American democracy in the recent past has led some observers to despair of meaningful resident participation in shaping food or other policy. However, our view is that a close reading of the last decade of food activism in New York City suggests multiple avenues for engaging young people, parents, people with diet-related illnesses, food workers and others in the process of changing food policy and politics. Once again, our suggestions are intended to provoke discussion, inspire others to share remedies, and to spark meaningful efforts that expand opportunities for New York City residents to shape their food environments.

## VI

### *Develop a collaborative food policy research and evaluation agenda.*

To define meaningful goals and strategies for improving food policy over the next decade, public officials, advocates, and community leaders will need more and better evidence to make informed decisions. The substantial existing body of evidence is an essential foundation for charting goals and strategies over the decade. As we have observed throughout the report, New York City still lacks answers to some of the most basic questions about its food policies and programs:

- What is the collective impact of policies that increase access to fruits and vegetables or reduce soda consumption? What components of these policy portfolios contribute most and least to observed changes? What has been the differential impact of these policy portfolios on different population groups?
- How do multiple community level and city level food policy initiatives interact with each other? What strategies could increase their synergistic impact?
- How do New York City eaters, especially low-income eaters, make decisions about what food and beverages to buy, cook, and eat? How do neighborhood and municipal food systems and cultural and social factors influence these choices? Without a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and more systematic evidence on what consumers want, it will be difficult to craft strategies that increase healthy food choices.

Currently, most consumer research is sponsored by the food industry and New Yorkers get most of their food information from the food

industry, via advertising and other forms of marketing. While New York City cannot by itself reduce this asymmetrical access to research and intervention, it can provide evidence to inform policies that seek to meet the public interest rather than advance private profit.

To remedy the gaps in research and evaluation studies that will guide the next decade of food policy, the many academic institutions and food policy researchers to develop a New York City food policy can meet to propose a research and evaluation agenda. By creating a voluntary, consensus building approach to food policy research, academics and city and state officials can encourage more coordinated systematic and cohesive research and evaluation of food policy.

A second tool would be to establish a repository of food policy reports, evaluation studies, and instruments to encourage more collaborative research and evaluation efforts, and to create a more systematic body of evidence.

Finally, various organizations with interests in food policy could bring together foundations and public funders that support food policy work in New York City. This would create an opportunity to develop standards and common measures for evaluation studies of the food interventions they support, and create a more coherent and systematic body of evidence.