



SNAP Declines Yet Hunger Persists:

NYC Caseloads 2012-2016 and the Need to Ease Access to Benefits

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 2012 and 2016, New York City experienced a 7.3% decline in participation in the federally-funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), despite 1.2 million city residents living in food insecure households during that time, a level higher than a decade ago. This study analyzed data on SNAP caseloads, economic trends, and surveys of SNAP applicants and participants to better understand the large drop in SNAP participation over this period and to identify strategies to improve access to SNAP benefits for all New Yorkers in need of food assistance.

Our analysis of caseload data confirmed that the citywide reduction in SNAP participants, mirroring trends at the state and national level, is statistically associated with falling rates of poverty and unemployment, a positive outcome of New York City's economic recovery from the Great Recession. However, many New Yorkers who struggle with poverty and food insecurity are not currently receiving these benefits. Additionally, there was significant variation in SNAP prevalence from community to community, with participation in neighborhoods like Bushwick dropping 28% and Bayside growing 8%. These differences indicate the need for closer scrutiny of neighborhood level data, particularly neighborhood-level SNAP eligibility rates, to determine whether they reflect demographic and economic changes (and particularly issues related to immigration and language) that warrant different forms of outreach and case management.

The results of a survey of SNAP applicants and participants conducted by the New York City Human Resources Administration on behalf of this study showed that the respondents value SNAP benefits, with three quarters agreeing that SNAP enables them to afford healthy food for their families. Yet the survey also indicated the persistence of customer service issues at SNAP centers, with two-thirds of respondents rating their interactions with city staff as either fair or poor. About 40% of respondents found the application process, particularly submitting required documentation and completing the application interview, somewhat or very difficult.

HFA's in-person survey of 224 low-income adults, 71% of whom were currently receiving SNAP benefits, revealed more positive experiences with SNAP. Nearly half of those participating in SNAP reported that it was easy learning how to get benefits, assembling necessary documents, submitting applications, interacting with HRA staff, completing interviews, and applying at non-HRA sites. With respect to interactions with HRA employees, most respondents were able to get their questions answered quickly and accurately, and found staff were respectful and helpful, and spoke their native language. Nonetheless, a not insignificant number of respondents encountered difficulties with assembling documentation (15%), getting an appointment with HRA (17%), finding the right HRA office (13%), and getting prompt and accurate answers to questions (11%).

The trend analysis and survey results suggest that while declining SNAP participation is mostly associated with an improved economy and limits on program participation set by the federal government , additional City efforts beyond those implemented by HRA over the past few years are warranted to ensure that all eligible New Yorkers receive SNAP benefits. These include tailored outreach to specific communities and demographic groups, such as older adults and those who may fear increased federal scrutiny of immigrants and their families. Additional analysis of the dynamics of SNAP participation at the community scale would facilitate interventions targeting the needs of specific communities, particularly those undergoing economic and demographic change, to ease the administrative barriers noted by survey respondents. Finally, despite concerns about proposed federal cuts to SNAP, advocates should continue to urge for policies to increase eligibility.

INTRODUCTION

New York City's overall economy has rebounded from the Great Recession of 2007-2009, yet the economic growth that has contributed to the city's recovery has been distributed inequitably.¹ A significant portion of the employment growth since the recession has been in low-wage and part-time jobs, contributing to income inequality and leaving large segments of the population, such as those without a college degree, with high levels of unemployment.²

Citywide, the number of New Yorkers struggling against hunger dropped by 15 percent over the past six years, but is still 15 percent higher than a decade ago, before the recession, according to an analysis of federal data by Hunger Free America (HFA). In 2014-2016, one in seven New Yorkers -- 1.2 million people -- lived in food insecure homes, compared to 1.4 million in 2011-2013 and 1.0 million in 2004-2006.³

The city's network of food pantries and soup kitchens that provide more than 100 million meals annually to the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including the still-high number of homeless individuals (see Figure 1),⁴ experienced increased demand for emergency food during the recent period of economic recovery. Hunger Free America found that in 2017, New York City food pantries and soup kitchens fed 6 percent more people than the year before, on top of an increase of 9 percent in 2016, 5 percent in 2015, and 7 percent in 2014.⁵

Increasing participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – formerly called the Food Stamp Program – among eligible New Yorkers is a key strategy for reducing hunger and food insecurity. As the nation's largest domestic food and nutrition assistance program, SNAP provided approximately \$67 billion in benefits to low-income individuals and households throughout the United States in Fiscal Year 2016, helping more than 44 million people in need purchase food for themselves and for their households.⁶ In New York City, SNAP

¹ Mielnicki, L, Heydarpour, F, Vasquez, O. 2017. New York City's Labor Market: Evidence from the Recent Expansion. New York City: Office of the Comptroller. Accessed at <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-labor-market-evidence-from-the-recent-expansion/>

² Ibid.

³ Hunger Free America, "Working New York Still Hungry: New York City and State Hunger Report," Annual New York Hunger Survey, November 2017, <http://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2017%20NY%20City%20and%20State%20Annual%20Hunger%20Survey%20Report%20.pdf>

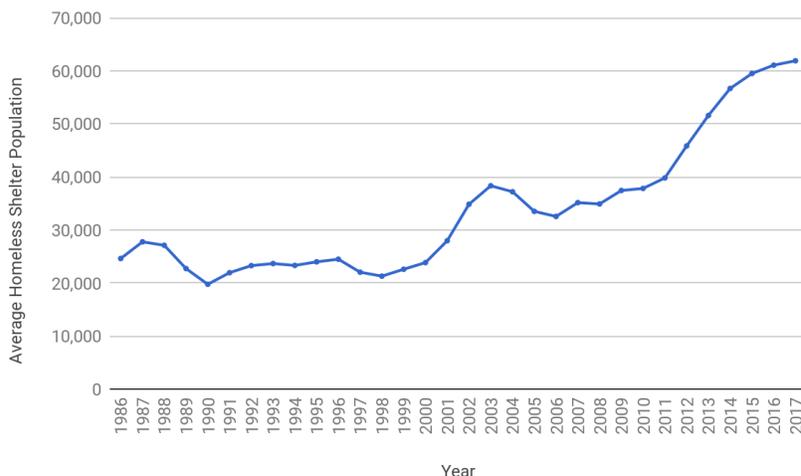
⁴ NYC Coalition for the Homeless. Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City. 2017. Accessed 10 September 2017. <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org>

⁵ Op. Cit. Hunger Free America, "Working New York Still Hungry: New York City and State Hunger Report."

⁶ Cunyngnam, K, Sukasih, A., & Castner, L. 2017. Empirical Bayes Shrinkage Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in Fiscal Year 2012 to Fiscal Year 2014 for All Eligible People and Working Poor People. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

benefits are a lifeline for approximately one-fifth of the city’s population who depend on the benefits to supplement their incomes and put food on the table.

Figure 1. Homeless shelter population in NYC, annual averages 2012 – 2017



Source: Coalition for the Homeless. New York City Homeless Municipal Shelter Population. Accessed at http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/NYCHomelessShelterPopulation-Worksheet1983-Present_Sept2017.pdf

SNAP is designed to be “counter-cyclical,” which means that the rolls are supposed to increase when the economy is weaker and decrease when the economy is stronger, as Figure 2 shows. The program has effectively functioned in this manner over the last few decades nationwide and in New York City. For example, from Fiscal Year 2007 through Fiscal Year 2013 – covering the great Recession and its immediate aftermath – SNAP participation increased by 80 percent nationwide; however, from Fiscal year 2014 through Fiscal year 2017, as the overall economy recovered, participation dropped by ten percent nationwide.⁷

The benefits of increased SNAP participation extend beyond merely providing households money to buy food. By providing this extra income, SNAP reduces poverty -- by an estimated 3.2% in New York City.⁸ SNAP benefits also stabilize household finances and free up income for other household necessities.⁹ The federal SNAP dollars that flow to recipients support the wages -- and food budgets -- of many other low- and middle-income New Yorkers, from grocery

⁷ US Department of agriculture Food and Nutrition Service caseload statistics, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

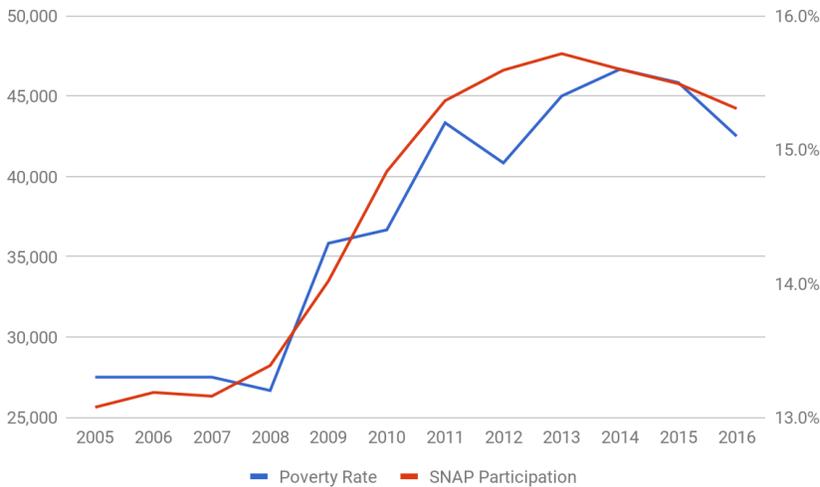
⁸ City of New York. Mayor’s Office of Operations. New York City Government Poverty Measure 2005-2015: An Annual Report from the Office of the Mayor.

⁹ Kim, Jiyeon. “Do SNAP Participants Expand Non-Food Spending When they Receive More SNAP Benefits? - Evidence from the 2009 SNAP Benefits Increase.” Food Policy. December 2016.

clerks to truck drivers, who work in the food and allied sectors.¹⁰ With an economic multiplier of 1.79, every \$5 in SNAP expenditures circulates through the economy to generate approximately \$9 in economic activity, amounting to an estimated \$5 billion in economic benefits for New York City.¹¹

Figure 2. US Poverty Rate (%) and SNAP Participation (000s), 2005 to 2016

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey



The importance of SNAP has prompted the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) – which oversees SNAP in the city -- and other city agencies and nonprofits involved in administering the federal program to improve access to SNAP benefits. Over the past few years, HRA has: enabled people to apply and certify eligibility online instead of in HRA’s offices; offered on-demand interviews to simplify recertification; released a mobile app to enable some clients to submit documents more easily; tracked waiting times at SNAP enrollment centers to reduce inconvenience; rolled out a marketing campaign and website (foodhelp.nyc) to publicize the program; and secured funding for financial incentives like Health Bucks to make shopping at farmers markets with SNAP more affordable.^{12,13}

¹⁰ Cohen, N., Poppendieck, J., & Freudentberg, N. (2017). Food Justice in the Trump Age: Priorities for Urban Food Advocates. *J. Food L. & Pol'y*, 13, 43.

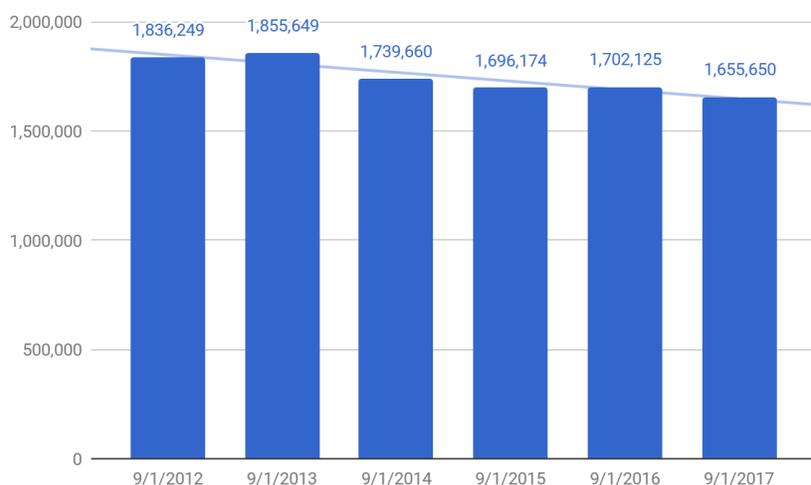
¹¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/economic-linkages/>

¹² New York City Human Resources Administration. Preliminary Mayor’s Management Report 2017. 2017. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2017/hra.pdf>

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, *The Evolution of SNAP Modernization Initiatives in Five States* by Lara Hulseley, Kevin Conway, Andrew Gothro, Rebecca Kleinman, Megan Reilly, Scott Cody, and Emily Sama-Miller. Project Officer, Rosemarie Downer. Alexandria, VA: March 2013.

Despite the persistence of food insecurity and hunger in New York City, the value added by SNAP benefits to households and the economy, and in spite of the new initiatives to make signing up for SNAP easier, participation in the program has declined by nearly 10%, or 180,595 people, between September 2012 and September 2017, as illustrated in Figure 3.¹⁴ The drop between 2016 and 2017 was particularly steep at 2.7%. While much of the decline mirrors the decline in poverty in New York City (as the trend lines in Figure 4 illustrate), a positive trend appropriately reflecting the counter-cyclical nature of the program, many eligible New Yorkers are still not accessing SNAP benefits.

Figure 3. Total NYC SNAP Participants 2012-2017



Source: NYC Human Resources Administration

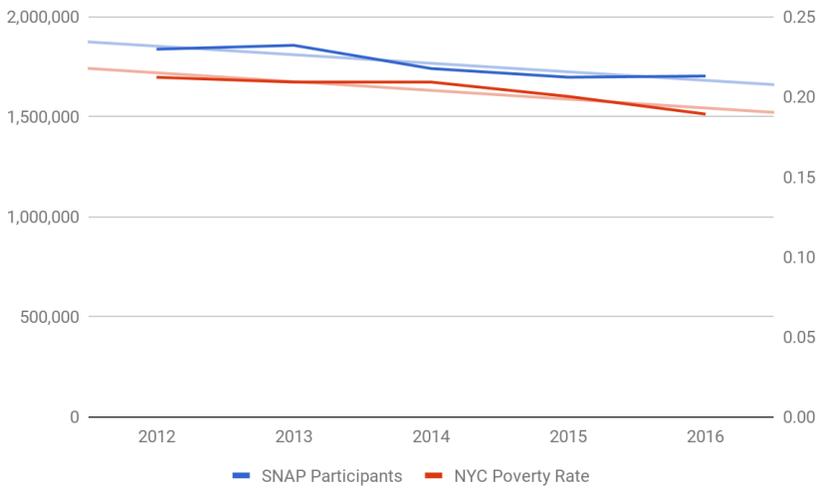
Key questions for policymakers and food advocates are how to ensure participation in SNAP by those who still need (and qualify for) help and how to increase participation in the program among eligible people. SNAP participation levels are affected by many factors, including underlying economic conditions that determine eligibility and motivation to participate, and programmatic elements that influence whether and to what extent eligible people choose to apply and recertify. Through an analysis of SNAP participation data, combined with surveys of applicants, recipients, and potential participants, this study explores:

- Whether trends in SNAP participation in New York City differ from similar state and federal declines over the same period, which have been attributed to the nation’s recovery from the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and an overall reduction in unemployment and poverty;

¹⁴ source: DSS Office of Planning and Performance Management, March 2017. Data for 2017 are from https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/charts/snap_recipients.pdf

- The extent to which changes in SNAP participation differ by neighborhood within NYC; and what that might mean for policy interventions; and
- Perceptions of and experiences with the SNAP program by low-income New Yorkers that suggest opportunities to encourage more eligible individuals to participate in the program.

Figure 4. Decreases in NYC SNAP Participants and NYC Poverty Rate, 2012-2016



Sources: NYC Human Resources Administration, US Census American Community Survey

METHODS

The study analyzed four primary sets of data:

1. SNAP individual participation data at the national, state, city, borough, and community district scale for 2012-2016 provided by HRA;
2. US Census and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) data on population, poverty, employment, and rent burden and other secondary data sources;
3. The results of an HRA-administered online survey of SNAP applicants; and
4. The results of an HFA-conducted in-person survey of clients of food assistance organizations.

SNAP Participation Levels

To understand the drop in SNAP participation, we analyzed HRA-provided individual level SNAP participation data (including both households that also receive cash assistance and those that do not) for years 2012 to 2016 for New York City, by borough, and by each of the city's 59 community districts, to calculate the rate at which participation changed during that period. We used the number of individuals participating in the SNAP program citywide, by borough and by community district and by Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) to estimate the prevalence rate of SNAP participants at each scale by calculating SNAP participants as a percentage of the total population citywide and by borough, community district, and PUMA for 2012-2016.

We analyzed the relationship between SNAP prevalence from 2012 to 2016 and:

- the poverty rate (the number of people below the federal poverty threshold divided by the number of people for whom poverty status was determined),
- the unemployment rate (the number of people aged 16 years and older in the civilian labor force who are unemployed, divided by the total number of people aged 16 years and older in the civilian labor force); and
- moderately rent-burdened households (the percentage of renter households whose gross rent was 30% or more of monthly pre-tax income).

To measure the relationships among percent poverty, unemployment, and moderate rent burden, and the independent variable of SNAP prevalence, we used regression modeling, a common statistical method to test correlations between dependent and independent variables.¹⁵ To analyze the degree of association between SNAP prevalence and percent poverty, unemployment and moderate rent burden by community district, for 2012-2016, we used a fixed effects model, a method of generalized linearized regression that is appropriate for

¹⁵ Moderate rent burden, when 30 percent or more of total household income is spent on gross rent, is a financial pressure for many low-income New York City households that varies by community.

measuring within-group effects over time.¹⁶ Statistical significance was assessed at an alpha level of 0.05. Only the results from the SNAP prevalence rate model are presented in this report, although we analyzed both the absolute numbers of SNAP participants and prevalence of SNAP participation in the population.

We also measured whether the percentage change in SNAP prevalence between 2012 and 2016 in each of the city's PUMAs was correlated with PUMA-level variables that reflect changing demographic and economic characteristics of the city's neighborhoods, including percent changes in poverty, unemployment, rent burden, median rent, income diversity, and percent of the population that is foreign born, Asian, Hispanic, and Black people. The Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was calculated to determine the degree to which there is a linear component of association between each variable and the percentage change in SNAP prevalence.

Data on population, unemployment, poverty, and rent burden at the city, borough, and community district and/or PUMA level were obtained from NYU Furman Center's CoreData.nyc, an online platform that aggregates and organizes New York City demographic, socioeconomic, and housing data from the US Census American Community Survey (ACS), Housing and Urban Development, and other sources. Additional data sources are noted in footnotes and figure and table captions. All quantitative analyses were conducted with SAS 9.3. Descriptive statistics and graphs were prepared with Excel and Google Sheets.

Online Survey of SNAP Applicants

To identify obstacles faced in applying for SNAP benefits, in August 2016, HRA administered a convenience sample survey via email to approximately 24,000 New York City residents who applied online for SNAP via ACCESS NYC (now known as ACCESS HRA), the city's online public benefits application portal. The survey, administered in English and Spanish, contained 18 questions about the respondent's experiences with and perceptions of the SNAP application process and the SNAP program. HRA received 360 responses (335 in English and 25 in Spanish), a response rate of 1.5%. These responses were coded by HFA. More than half of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44 (see Table 1), 71% were female, one-third identified as Hispanic, and roughly half identified as Black or African American and half as white.

The non-random sampling and low response rate preclude generalizing the survey results to the population of SNAP participants. However, the report presents response frequencies to identify several potential barriers to SNAP participation that suggest the need for further analysis.

¹⁶ Charness G, Gneezy U, Kuhn MA. Experimental methods: Between-subject and within-subject design. *J Econ Behav Organ.* 2012; 81(1):1-8.

Table 1. Ages of Online Survey Respondents

Age Range	Percentage of Respondents
18-24	10.6%
25-34	35.8%
35-44	27.9%
45-49	9.0%
50-59	9.3%
60 and older	6.6%

In-Person Survey of Low-Income Adults

HFA and CUNY developed a 21-question survey instrument in English and Spanish to measure how respondents learn about federal food benefits, and their attitudes towards and experiences with accessing programs like SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). The survey protocol was designed to uncover structural, economic, demographic, cultural, perceptual, and other factors that may influence whether individuals apply for SNAP, choose to recertify their eligibility, and/or discontinue participation in SNAP. The survey also included questions about participation in WIC, a related federal food support program, to identify relationships between decisions to participate in WIC and decisions to participate in SNAP, and questions about food security to identify relationships between household food security and decisions about SNAP participation. The survey questions were pretested on HFA staff, and were revised prior to administration to improve clarity.

HFA reached out to 15 New York City food organizations to serve as survey sites and to allow recruitment of study participants. Eight organizations, located across all five boroughs (see Table 2), chose to participate in the study and allowed HFA researchers to solicit volunteer research subjects.

HFA administered the survey in June and July 2017 to a convenience sample of 225 adults. Survey administration involved identifying individuals who appeared to be 18 years and older at each location and soliciting their participation in the study. Eligible and willing participants 18 and older were offered a round-trip MetroCard as an incentive for the approximately 15 minutes required to complete the survey. Each potential study participant was advised of his/her rights as a research subject and provided oral consent prior to taking the survey. Study participants filled out paper surveys with HFA assistance. All elements of study design and implementation were reviewed and approved by the CUNY Institutional Research Board to ensure the protection of the research subjects.

Table 2. Sites Participating in HFA Survey

Borough	New York City Food Organization
Manhattan	New York Common Pantry
	West Side Campaign Against Hunger
	Ali Forney Center
Brooklyn	Neighbors Together
	Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger
Bronx	Part of the Solution (POTS)
Queens	Hour Children Food Pantry
Staten Island	Project Hospitality

Completed surveys were collected by HFA and coded to an Excel spreadsheet. The coded survey responses were shared with the CUNY Principal Investigator (PI) for data analysis. The response frequencies are reported, and non-parametric rank-sum tests (Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis) were used to determine whether the survey responses to different questions, including demographic characteristics (age, race, gender), were statistically related.

Analysis of SNAP Participation Data

National SNAP Participation Trends

The number of SNAP participants nationwide has varied over the past few decades, generally increasing during economic downturns and decreasing during periods of economic growth, closely tracking trends in poverty and unemployment. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, SNAP participation rates rose each year, increasing by nearly 50% between 2008 and 2013 and peaking in 2013.¹⁷ The growth, a result of both more entrants to the program and longer duration on SNAP, is generally attributed to the financial impacts of the economic downturn and the concerted efforts of public/nonprofit SNAP outreach partnerships nationwide, as well as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which increased SNAP benefits by approximately 13.6% beginning in April 2009.^{18,19,20}

SNAP participation in the US dropped after 2013, as a result of the economic recovery and the expiration of ARRA benefits in 2013 (which in New York City cut SNAP benefits by an average of \$18/month).^{21,22} Nationwide, the number of people participating in SNAP fell by nearly 8% between 2013 and 2016, as Figure 5 shows. The decline was widespread, with 45 states experiencing decreased SNAP participation. The sharp drop between 2015 and 2016, when SNAP participation fell from 45.8 million to 44.2 million individuals, is attributable to the continuing nationwide economic recovery and also the resumption in 2016 of a three-month time limit (within three years) for SNAP participation by unemployed, childless adults, which caused an estimated 500,000 individuals to lose their SNAP benefits.²³

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2016, by Sarah Lauffer. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA, 2017.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, Dynamics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation from 2008 to 2012, by Joshua Leftin, et al., Project Officer: Jenny Laster Genser, Alexandria, VA: 2014

¹⁹ Feeding America. 2014. SNAP Outreach Case Studies Coast to Coast. 2014 Executive Summary. Chicago: Feeding America. Accessed at <http://www.feedingamerica.org/research/program-evaluation/snap-outreach-evaluation.PDF>

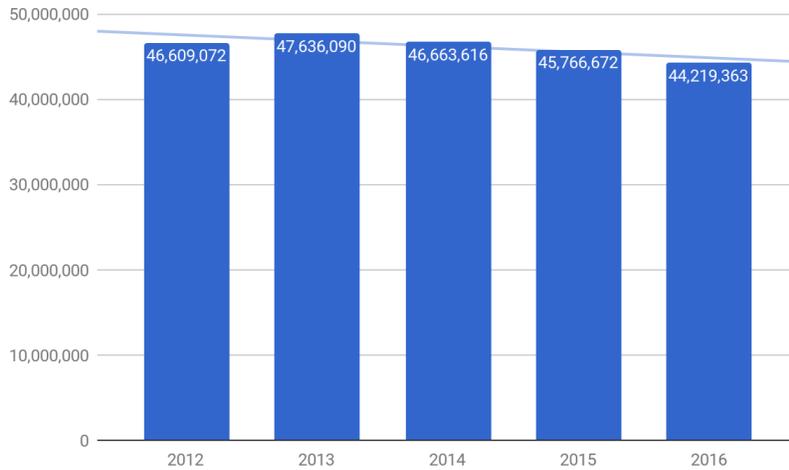
²⁰ Dean, S. & Rosenbaum, D. 2014. SNAP Benefits Will Be Cut for Nearly All Participants in November 2013. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2-8-13fa.pdf>

²¹ Khalil, Y., Koible, W. G., & Stampas, T. 2017. Trade-Offs at the Dinner Table: The Impacts of Unwanted Compromises. NY: Food Bank for NYC. Accessed at https://www.foodbanknyc.org/wp-content/uploads/Trade-Offs-at-the-Dinner-Table_FB-Research-Brief_Nov2017.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ Rosenbaum, D & Keith-Jennings, B. 2017. SNAP Caseload and Spending Declines Accelerated in 2016. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-caseload-and-spending-declines-accelerated-in-2016#_ftn1

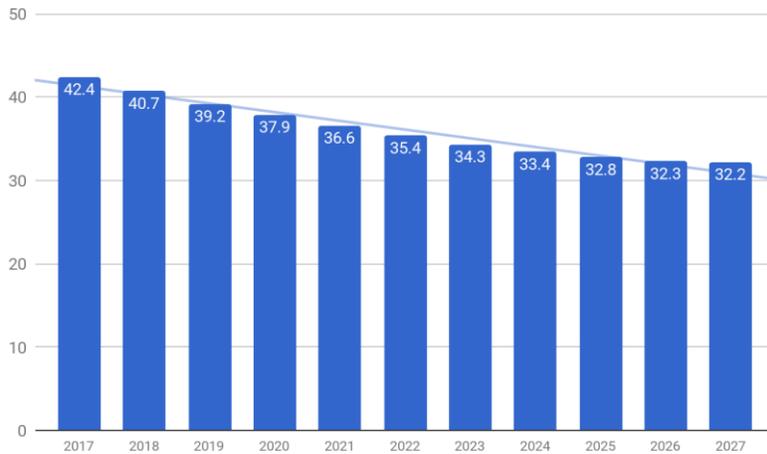
Figure 5. SNAP Participation in the U.S., 2012-2016



Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Services. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

Whether this trend in declining SNAP participation continues depends on the state of the US economy and new policies that may affect the value of SNAP benefits or eligibility criteria. The Congressional Budget Office, for example, has projected a steady decrease in the number of Americans participating in SNAP (Figure 6), from 42.4 million in 2017 to 32.2 million in 2027, predicting that the numbers of SNAP participants in 2027 will approximate 2007 levels.²⁴

Figure 6. Projected US Average Monthly Participation in SNAP, 2017 to 2027 (in millions of people)



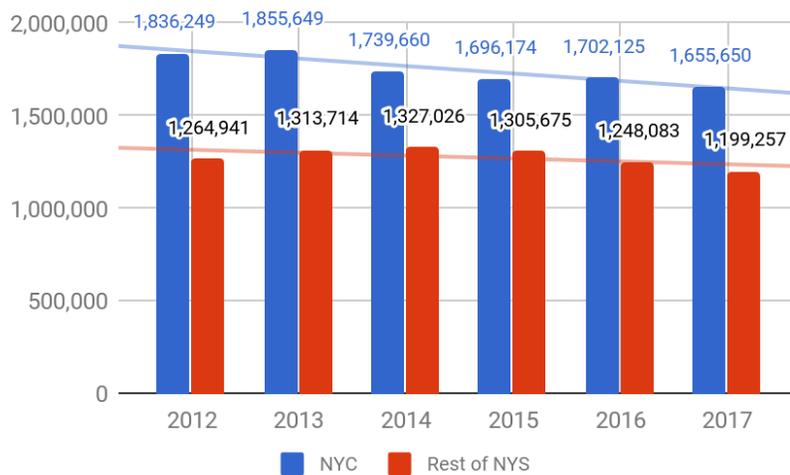
Source: Congressional Budget Office. 2017. Baseline Projections for Selected Programs.

²⁴ Congressional Budget Office. 2017. Baseline Projections for Selected Programs. <https://www.cbo.gov/about/products/baseline-projections-selected-programs#20>

SNAP Participation Trends in New York State

The number of SNAP participants in New York State beyond the New York City borders (the “rest of state”) has also declined over the past few years, as Figure 7 illustrates. In the rest of state, participation in the program peaked in 2014, a year later than New York City’s 2013 peak. Whereas New York City experienced a 6.25% drop in SNAP participants between 2013 and 2014, the most precipitous drop in the rest of the state occurred between 2015 and 2016 (4.41%) and 2016 and 2017 (3.91%). Moreover, as the linear trend lines in Figure 7 show, the decline in SNAP participants has been steeper in New York City than in the rest of the state.

Figure 7. Total SNAP Participants, NYC and Rest of State, 2012-2017

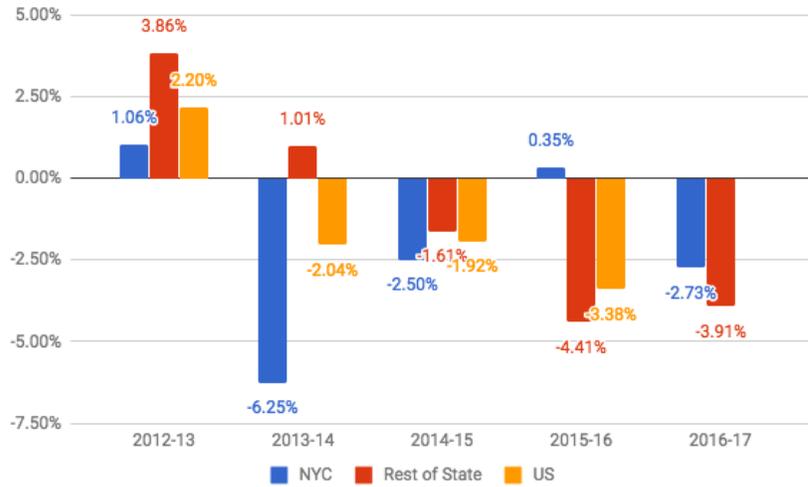


Sources: NYC Human Resources Administration, <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Total-SNAP-Recipients/5c4s-jwtq>

SNAP Participation in New York City vs. Rest of State and US

The number of New York City individuals participating in SNAP declined from 1,836,249 in 2012 to 1,655,650 in 2017, mirroring national and state trends. As Figure 8 shows, New York City experienced an earlier and more pronounced drop in SNAP participation compared to the rest of state and US. New York City’s decline was particularly steep in the 2013-14 period compared to state and national participation levels. While New York City experienced a small increase in SNAP participation between 2015 and 2016, participation levels in the rest of state and US fell by 2.33% and 3.38%, respectively in these years.

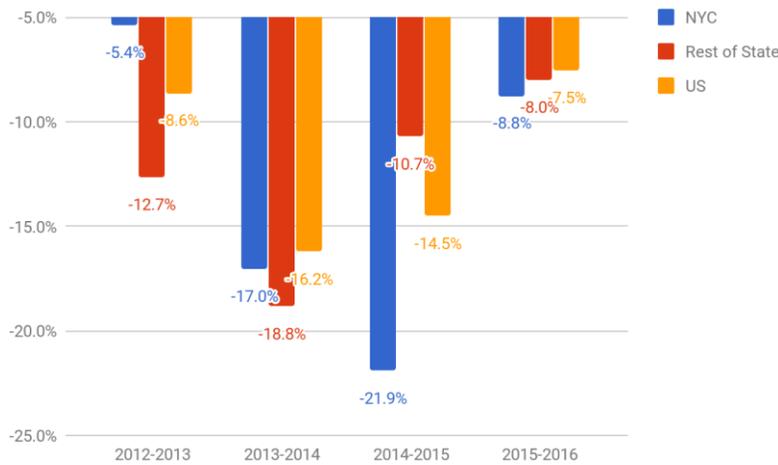
Figure 8. Annual Change in SNAP Participation, 2012-2017, in Percent Change, NYC, NYS, and 2012-2016 for US



Sources: Calculated based on NYC Human Resources Administration data, <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Social-Services/Total-SNAP-Recipients/5c4s-jwtq>; and USDA

As Figure 9 illustrates, unemployment in the city, rest of state, and US dropped between 2012 and 2016. In New York City, the drop was sharp in the periods 2013-2014 (17%) and 2014-2015 (21.9%).

Figure 9. Change in Unemployment Rate, NYC, Rest of State, and US, 2012-2016

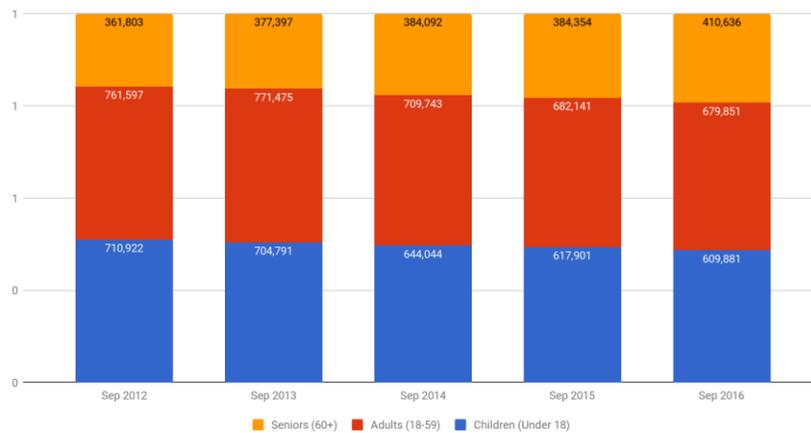


Sources: Local Area Unemployment Statistics Program, US Census Current Population Survey

Participation by Age

The decline in SNAP participation in New York City has been skewed towards younger individuals, as Figure 10 shows. The number of older adults participating in SNAP grew by nearly 12% during this period, while the number of younger adults in the program dropped 10.7%, and participation by children dropped 14.2%.²⁵ In part, this reflects the greying of the city’s population and a larger pool of low-income older adults. While the total New York City population increased 3.2% between 2012 and 2016, the population 60 and older increased by 9.7% during that period.²⁶

Figure 10. NYC SNAP Recipients by Age Group, 2012 to 2016



Source: DSS Office of Planning and Performance Management

Declining Eligibility

SNAP participation is a function of both eligibility and individual decisions to participate in the program. Calculating eligibility reliably at the city scale is difficult, yet HRA has published an estimated percentage of eligible individuals who received SNAP benefits between 2012 and 2015. This percentage dropped from 76.6% in 2012 to 72.5% in 2015, as Figure 11 shows.²⁷

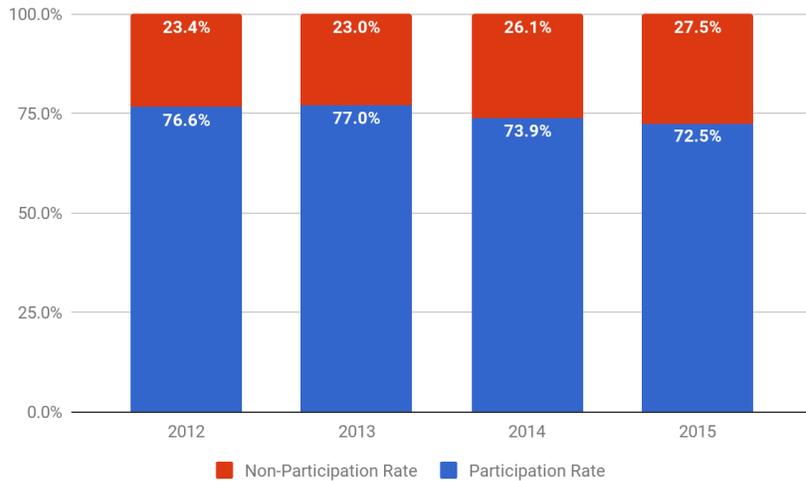
²⁵ DSS Office of Planning and Performance Management, March 2017.

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

²⁷ NYC Human Resources Administration administrative data for SNAP enrollment, and U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Series 1-year files for estimated number of residents below 125% of the official poverty level and estimated number of residents eligible to receive SNAP benefits.

This means that the number of individuals who are estimated to be eligible for SNAP but who do not participate in the program grew from 560,943 in 2012 to 643,376 in 2015, as Table 3 indicates. An estimate of the participation rate for 2016 has not yet been published.

Figure 11. Estimated NYC SNAP Participation, in % of eligible people who participate and % of eligible non-participants, 2012-2015.



Source: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/snap/2002.2015NYCSNAPParticipation.pdf>

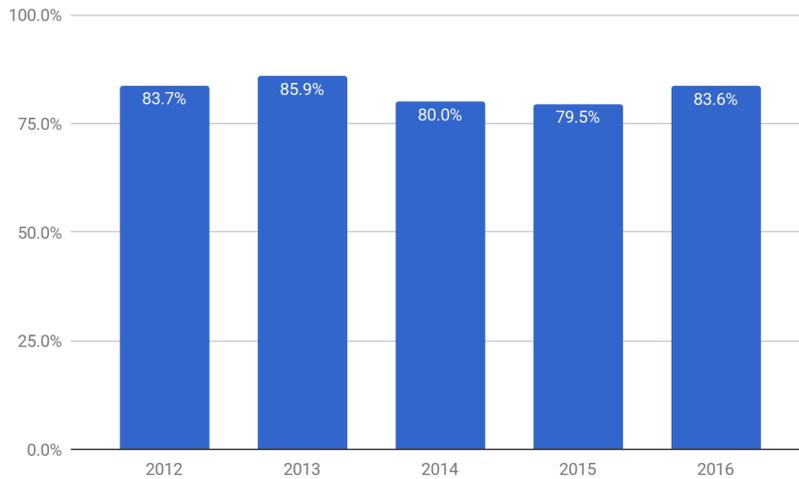
Table 3. Estimated Number of Individuals Eligible for, but Not Participating in, SNAP, 2012-2015

Year	Participants	Participation Rate	Estimated Eligible	Estimated Eligible but Not Participating
2012	1,836,249	76.6%	2,397,192	560,943
2013	1,855,649	77.0%	2,409,934	554,285
2014	1,739,660	73.9%	2,354,073	614,413
2015	1,696,174	72.5%	2,339,550	643,376

Sources: HRA Access and Participation Rates for 2002-2015; calculations based on SNAP participation levels

An alternative indicator of participation, the Program Access Index (PAI), is the ratio of the average monthly number of SNAP participants over a year to the number of people with incomes below 125% of the official poverty level. See Figure 12. Like the HRA participation figures, it is an imprecise measure of eligibility within the population, but provides a rough approximation of the proportion and number of potentially eligible individuals not receiving SNAP benefits, and thus the magnitude of the population who could be enrolled in the program.

Figure 12. SNAP Program Access Index for NYC 2012-2016

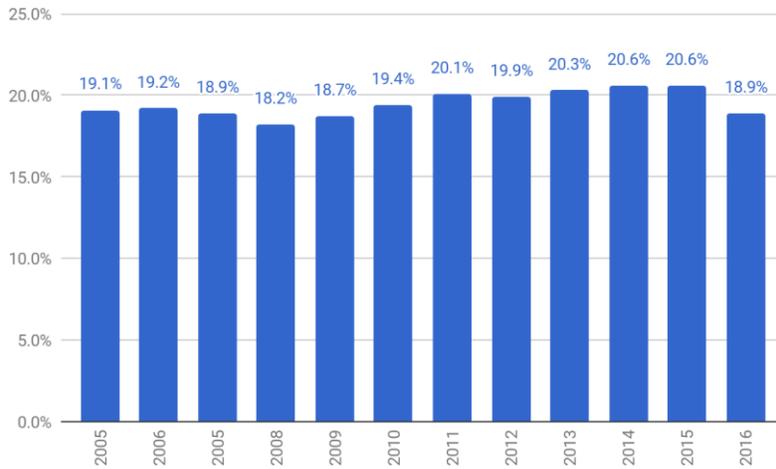


Sources: USDA, "Calculating the SNAP Program Access Index: A Step-By-Step Guide," updated annually. Accessed at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/PAI2015.pdf> and HRA, SNAP Access and Participation Rates for 2002-2015 <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/facts/snap/2002.2015NYCSNAPParticipation.pdf> 2016 PAI calculated from US Census 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates of population with income below 125 percent of poverty level

Relationships Among SNAP Prevalence, Poverty, Unemployment, and Rent Burden

The SNAP program uses a number of household and economic variables to determine individual eligibility, but poverty (Figure 13) and unemployment are significantly correlated with population scale eligibility and the need for income assistance and thus demand for SNAP benefits. A third variable, rent burden, is an indicator of the value of supplemental income, especially in expensive cities like New York, where rents consume 30% to more than 50% of household income, creating financial incentives to sign up for programs like SNAP.

Figure 13. Poverty Rate, New York City, 2005-2016, in % of population below US poverty threshold



Source: US Census American Community Survey 2005-2016

Citywide SNAP Prevalence

For the period 2012 to 2016, we analyzed the association between citywide changes in the SNAP prevalence rate (i.e., SNAP participation/population), the SNAP participation rate (i.e., the absolute number of SNAP participants), and three independent variables: poverty, unemployment, and moderate rent burden. The results in Table 4 show that the change in citywide SNAP prevalence between 2012 and 2016, as the outcome of interest, was statistically associated with two independent outcomes, percent poverty ($p < .0001$) and percent unemployed ($p = 0.03$), but not the third independent outcome, changes in the number of individuals who were moderately rent burdened ($p = 0.06$).

Table 4. Tests of Fixed Effects of Economic Variables on the SNAP Prevalence Rate in NYC, 2012-2016

Independent Variables	F Value	Statistical p-value
Percent in poverty	17.9	<.0001
Percent unemployed	4.6	0.03
Percent moderately rent burdened	3.6	0.06

Citywide SNAP Participation

An analysis of the change in SNAP participation as a second outcome of interest, and poverty, unemployment and moderate rent burden as independent variables, produced similar results: percent poverty and percent unemployed were statistically associated with changes in SNAP enrollment, but percent rent burdened was not, as Table 5 shows. This finding is not surprising

given that federal SNAP eligibility formulas heavily factor in poverty and unemployment (lack of income), but only secondarily factor in housing costs.

Table 5. Tests of Fixed Effects of Economic Variables on SNAP Participation in NYC, 2012-2016

Independent Variables	F Value	Pr > F
Percent in poverty	7.5	0.01
Percent unemployed	8.3	0.004
Percent moderately rent burdened	1.1	0.29

Community Level SNAP Prevalence

Citywide data can mask economic and demographic changes at the community level that may cause shifts in SNAP participation and prevalence. Table 6 shows that the SNAP prevalence rate declined by more than 20% between 2012 and 2016 in six New York City communities, four of which (indicated in bold italics) have been undergoing gentrification, with rapid growth in rents and the number of college graduates, young adults, childless families, non-family households, and white residents, potentially reducing the percentage of SNAP-eligible individuals -- and thus SNAP prevalence -- in the community.²⁸

Table 6. Changes in SNAP Prevalence by Neighborhood, 2012 to 2016

Neighborhood Name	% Change in Prevalence 2012-2016
Middle Village/Ridgewood	-27.23%
Washington Heights/Inwood	-26.60%
North Crown Heights/Prospect Heights	-26.18%
Bushwick	-25.97%
Flatbush	-22.73%
Bedford Stuyvesant	-22.64%
Highbridge/South Concourse	-18.23%
Greenwich Village/Financial District	-18.13%
Ozone Park/Woodhaven	-18.08%
Kingsbridge Heights/Moshulu	-16.65%
East Flatbush	-15.54%
Morningside Heights/Hamilton Heights	-15.37%
Williamsburg/Greenpoint	-14.38%
Jamaica	-13.62%

²⁸ NYU Furman Center. The State of NYC's Housing and Neighborhoods in 2016. Accessed at http://furmancenter.org/files/sotc/SOC_2016_Full.pdf

Sunnyside/Woodside	-13.60%
Queens Village	-13.55%
Mid-Island	-13.54%
Central Harlem	-13.24%
Astoria	-13.16%
East Harlem	-13.13%
Coney Island	-12.89%
Brooklyn Heights/Fort Greene	-12.02%
South Crown Heights	-11.44%
Riverdale/Kingsbridge	-11.26%
Elmhurst/Corona	-11.06%
Park Slope/Carroll Gardens	-10.65%
Sunset Park	-10.33%
Greenwich Village/Financial District	-10.29%
East New York/Starrett City	-10.20%
Soundview/Parkchester	-9.93%
South Ozone Park/Howard Beach	-9.34%
University Heights/Fordham	-8.30%
Flatlands/Canarsie	-8.16%
Mott Haven/Hunts Point	-8.02%
Morrisania/Belmont	-7.75%
Mott Haven/Hunts Point	-6.84%
South Shore	-6.07%
Chelsea/Clinton/Midtown	-6.03%
Jackson Heights	-5.99%
Upper East Side	-5.90%
Sheepshead Bay/Gravesend	-4.93%
Hillcrest/Fresh Meadows	-4.67%
Williamsbridge/Baychester	-4.36%
North Shore	-3.83%
Chelsea/Clinton/Midtown	-3.55%
Lower East Side/Chinatown	-3.40%
Upper West Side	-3.33%
Morrisania/Belmont	-2.60%
Stuyvesant Town/Turtle Bay	-0.66%
Rego Park/Forest Hills	-0.10%
Bensonhurst	0.22%
Rockaways	0.76%

Flushing/Whitestone	3.29%
Bay Ridge	7.78%
Borough Park	8.48%
Pelham Parkway	8.70%
Brownsville/Ocean Hill	10.08%
Throgs Neck/Co-op City	12.13%
Bayside/Little Neck	13.20%

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients showed no significant relationships between the percentage change in SNAP prevalence between 2012 and 2016 and percentage changes in the following variables: poverty rate; unemployment rate; moderate rent burden; or percentage of the community that is foreign born, Hispanic, or Black.

Assessing why large changes in SNAP participation occur in particular communities requires tracking characteristics of each neighborhood in detail. For example, Brownsville/Ocean Hill lost nearly 15% of its population between 2012 and 2016, yet with 31% of the rental units under NYCHA control, a large portion of the low-income, SNAP-eligible population has been able to remain in the community. Moreover, the neighborhood’s 65 and older population has increased by 28.9%, further contributing to the 10% increased prevalence of SNAP participants. Relevant variables explaining shifts in SNAP prevalence include changes in the socioeconomic and demographic composition of the community; housing costs and the percentage of housing units that remain highly affordable because they are public; detailed knowledge of the concerns of specific sub-populations, such as immigrants from regions targeted by immigration enforcement; and access to SNAP enrollment centers and other places that provide information and assistance in accessing public benefits.

While our analysis examined SNAP prevalence, understanding why non-participation among eligible individuals varies significantly from neighborhood to neighborhood, as Table 7 illustrates, is also important in identifying strategies to increase participation. Some communities have very high eligibility or low participation as a percentage of their populations, resulting in neighborhoods with very large gaps between the numbers of those eligible for SNAP and those actually receiving SNAP benefits. Research by the consulting firm Civis Analytics suggests that non-participation among eligible individuals may be concentrated in certain ethnic communities and among communities of color.²⁹ Their estimation of non-participating eligible individuals is lower than HRA’s estimates or the PAI but illustrates that there are substantial community-level disparities in participation.

²⁹ Civis Analytics. 2017. How the Robin Hood Foundation Uses Data Science to Fight Poverty. Accessed at <https://www.civisanalytics.com/blog/robin-hood-foundation-uses-data-science-fight-poverty/>

Table 7. Eligible Individuals Not Participating in SNAP as a Percentage of Population, by Community District.

Community District	Community District Name	Percentage of Population Eligible for but Not Participating in SNAP
MN09	Morningside Heights and Hamilton Heights	9.2%-18.6%
BK04	Bushwick	
BK07	Sunset Park	
BK10	Bay Ridge and Dyker Heights	
BK16	Brownsville	
BX11	Morris Park and Bronxdale	
QN02	Woodside and Sunnyside	
QN03	Jackson Heights	
QN04	Elmhurst and Corona	
QN07	Flushing and Whitestone	
QN08	Hillcrest and Fresh Meadows	
QN10	South Ozone Park and Howard Beach	
QN11	Bayside and Little Neck	6.2%-9.2%
MN03	Lower East Side and Chinatown	
MN10	Central Harlem	
BK02	Fort Greene and Brooklyn Heights	
BK08	Crown Heights and Prospect Heights	
BK09	South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens	
BK11	Bensonhurst	
BK13	Coney Island	
BK15	Sheepshead Bay	
BX08	Riverdale and Fieldston	
BX09	Parkchester and Soundview	
QN01	Long Island City and Astoria	
QN05	Ridgewood and Maspeth	
QN09	Kew Gardens and Woodhaven	
QN12	Jamaica and Hollis	
MN06	Stuyvesant Town and Turtle Bay	
MN08	Upper East Side	
MN12	Washington Heights and Inwood	
BK12	Borough Park	
BK14	Flatbush and Midwood	
BK18	Flatlands and Canarsie	
BX01	Mott Haven and Melrose	
BX02	Hunts Point and Longwood	
BX04	Highbridge and Concourse	
QN06	Rego Park and Forest Hills	
QN13	Queens Village	
QN14	Rockaway and Broad Channel	
SI01	St. George and Stapleton	<3.8%
SI02	South Beach and Willowbrook	
SI03	Tottenville and Great Kills	
MN01	Financial District	
MN02	Greenwich Village and Soho	
MN04	Clinton and Chelsea	
MN05	Midtown	
MN07	Upper West Side	

MN11	East Harlem	
BK01	Greenpoint and Williamsburg	
BK03	Bedford Stuyvesant	
BK05	East New York and Starrett City	
BK06	Park Slope and Carroll Gardens	
BK17	East Flatbush	
BX03	Morrisania and Crotona	
BX05	Fordham and University Heights	
BX06	Belmont and East Tremont	
BX07	Kingsbridge Heights and Bedford	
BX10	Throgs Neck and Co-op City	
BX12	Williamsbridge and Baychester	

Source: Civis Analytics, May 2017. Accessed at <https://www.civisanalytics.com/uploads/2017/09/robin-hood-case-study.pdf>

Online Survey of SNAP Applicants and Participants

The results of the online survey of SNAP applicants and participants conducted by HRA illustrate the perceived benefits of the program and obstacles faced by those wishing to participate. Of the respondents, 59% were currently receiving SNAP benefits. Individuals applying through the AccessNYC (now ACCESS HRA) portal are in need of financial assistance to feed their households. As Figure 14 shows, approximately 87% of respondents said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I am able to afford the healthy food my family needs.”

Three quarters of respondents (Figure 15) indicated that SNAP enables them to afford healthy food for their families. As one respondent noted, “Thanks to now having SNAP benefits I am no longer behind in bills because I had to use cash to buy food for my family of five.” Another respondent said:

“The SNAP program has been a big help for me and my kids. Getting up every day and going to work and at the end of the week looking at my check I felt depressed and stressed not knowing how I was going to spend whether it was rent, phone bill, or food, or something for the kids. With the help of the SNAP program it’s been a big relief. I am very grateful that there are programs like this.”

Figure 14. Responses to statement: “I am able to afford the healthy food my family needs”

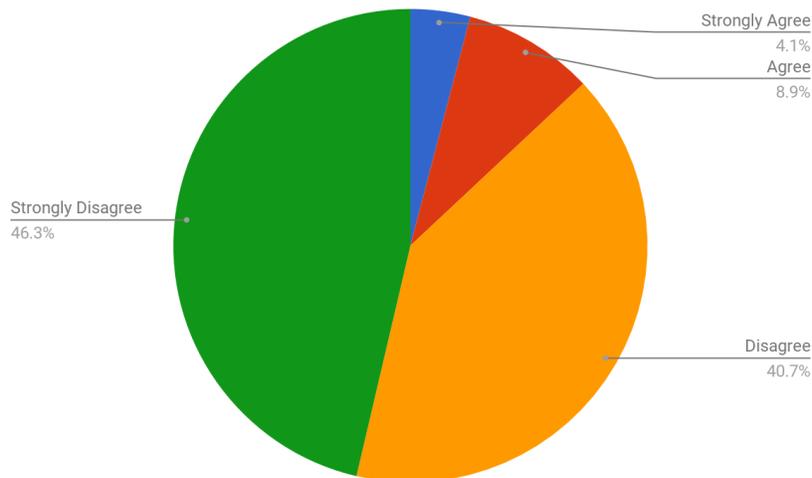
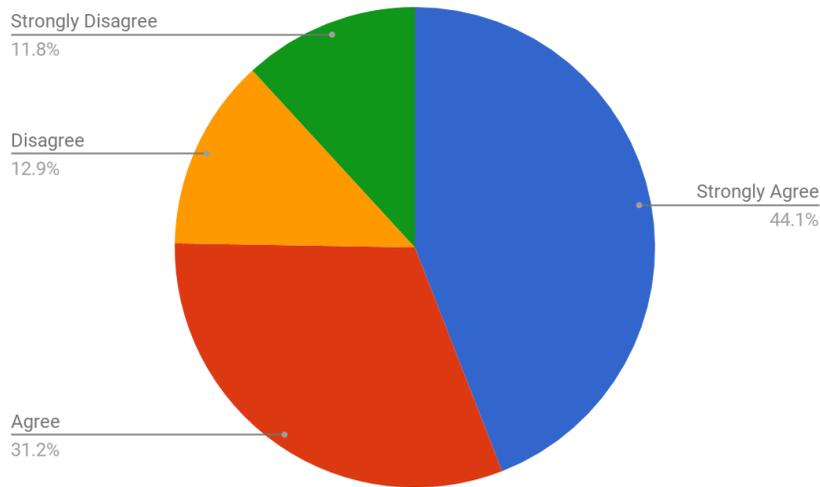
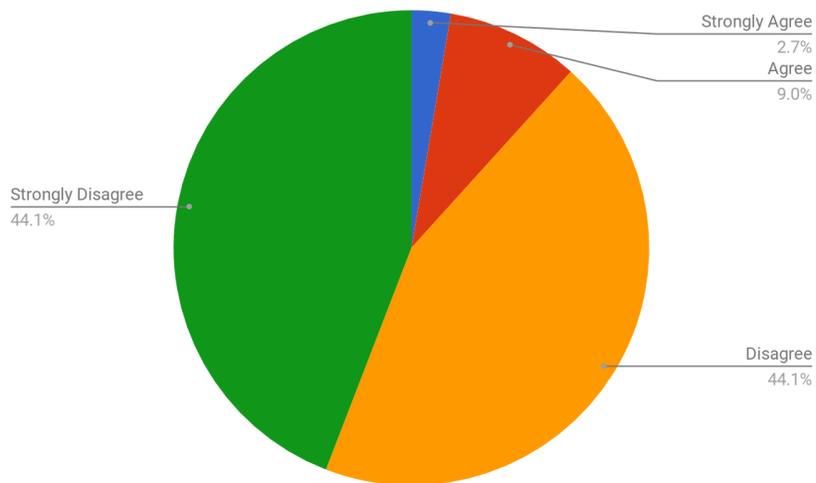


Figure 15. Responses to statement: “With help from SNAP, I am able to afford the healthy food my family needs.”



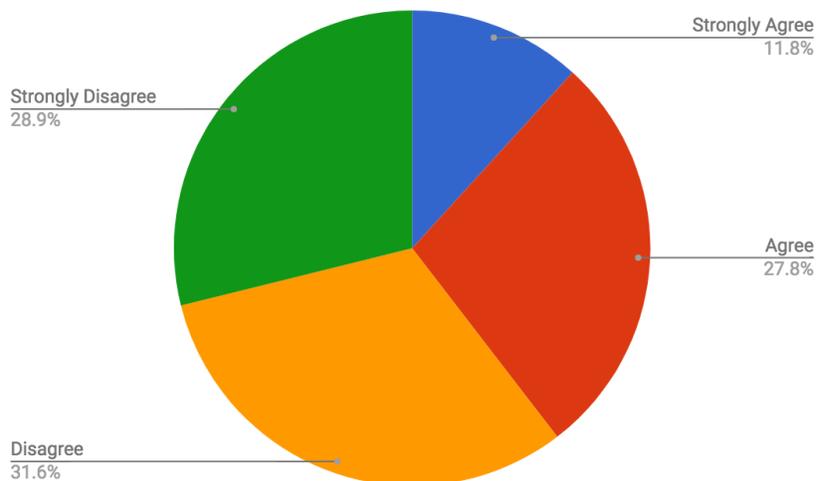
A large majority of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they delayed applying for SNAP because of fears about their own or family members’ immigration status, as Figure 16 illustrates. It is important to note, however, that respondents were individuals selected from HRA’s online portal and had both provided their personal information on the portal and volunteered to participate in this survey. Thus, the survey sample likely significantly under-represents individuals concerned about the discovery of their immigration status. Moreover, those who were foreign born or who have immigrant family members may have indicated disagreement with the statement to avoid revealing their immigration status.

Figure 16. Responses to statement: “I initially delayed applying for SNAP due to fear related to my immigration status or the status of my family members.”



Most respondents (60.5%) did not indicate feeling stigma when using SNAP. However, as Figure 17 shows, a significant percentage of respondents (39.6%) said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “When I use my SNAP benefits to buy food, I feel shame (or stigma).” A comment by one respondent reveals the complexity of stigma: “When I use my card everyone always looks at me like, ‘oh my god.’ But I don’t care. I bust my behind and it’s still not enough to put food on the table so I had to turn to SNAP -- hopefully not for long.” It illustrates that SNAP participants may feel judged poorly by others even if they themselves feel deserving of the SNAP benefits. The comment also suggests that the question may have been interpreted by some respondents to ask whether others view the use of SNAP as a shameful activity rather than whether the respondent him or herself feels shame or stigma.

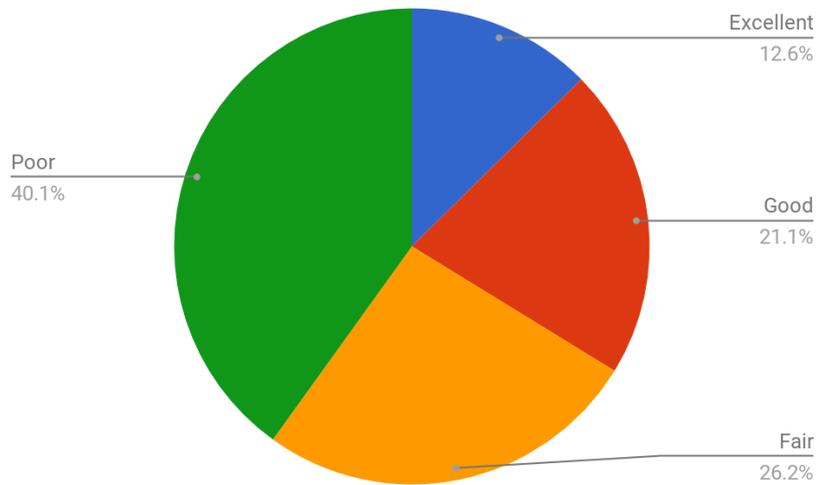
Figure 17. Responses to statement: “When I use my SNAP benefits to buy food, I feel shame (or stigma).”



In terms of the customer service received at SNAP centers, most respondents (66%) felt that the SNAP staff provided only fair or poor service, as Figure 18 shows. The comments of respondents noted missed phone calls to SNAP centers, the inconvenience of scheduling and rescheduling appointments, the length of the application process, and the attitudes of SNAP center workers. One respondent said:

“I will send the paperwork I called so many times [but] no one is there to get the phone. I got tired and went to the SNAP facility in Long Island City. They told me I had to reapply. I waited too long term. I reapply, after the interview I got approved for food snap send all the paperwork they want. [But] I never got a penny on my card.”

Figure 18. Responses to question: “How would you rate the customer service provided by SNAP staff?”



Another respondent noted:

“The phone interview is terrible. The phone call to set up the interview is late or no call at all. The notice of the phone interview appointment comes 3 to 5 days late or not at

all. Or the phone interview itself never occurs. Rescheduling an appointment is difficult, still a lot of the time you have to keep calling or you go to the center and they do not want to see you. They want to give you another appointment for the phone interview. This delays your application to be processed in a timely manner.”

The respondents, who were attempting to use the city’s online portal to apply for SNAP, had favorable views of the application process. Nearly three-quarters reported that it very or somewhat easy to understand what to do, as Figure 19 indicates, and Figure 20 shows that 78% found it very or somewhat easy to complete the application form. Others, however, described very difficult experiences with the application process:

“I originally applied online, and had a phone interview, and was told the materials I needed would be mailed to me. They arrived late.... I had two days to get the documents together, and by then the due date was the next day, plus, there was no information on where I should mail the documents. I mailed them to the address from which I got the materials, and never heard and then found out they had received them late, and I should have mailed them to the St. Nicholas branch...which no one told me. I then brought all my documents up to the St. Nicholas branch, submitted them through the scanner and didn't hear anything, called and found out I was denied, but there was no reason. No one ever sent me a reason, or informed me by mail that I was denied - and it was because I didn't provide all the documentation needed. I finally got to talk to someone and was approved on my third try - almost a year after I first tried. The whole process was confusing. It could have been simplified with more clear information in the application process.”

Figure 19. Responses to question about ease or difficulty of “understanding what I needed to do” to apply for SNAP

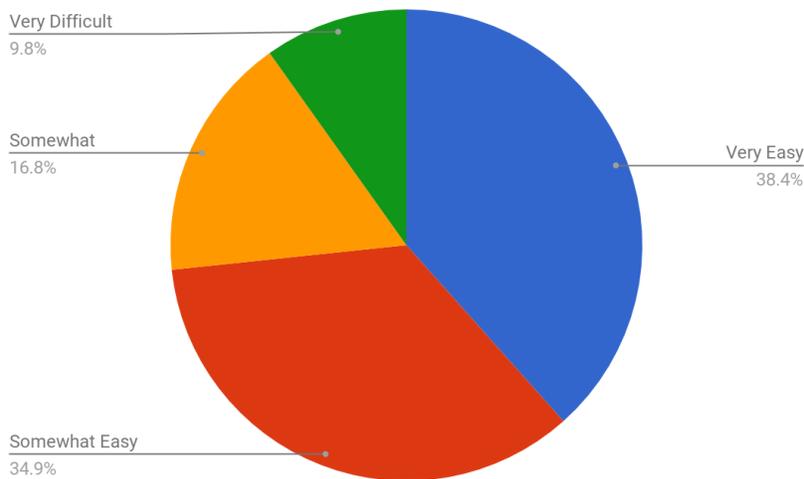
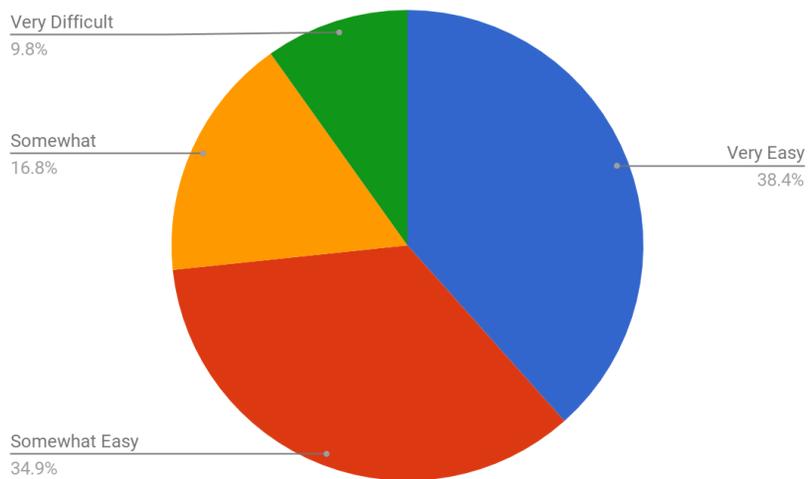


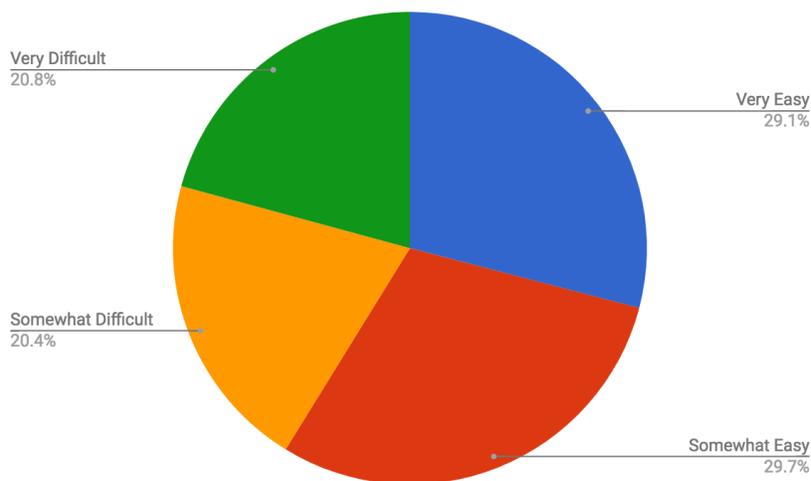
Figure 20. Responses to question about ease or difficulty of “completing the application form”



Submitting the required documentation was somewhat or very difficult for 41% of respondents, as Figure 21 shows, while 38% (see Figure 22) said that completing the application interview was somewhat or very difficult. A number of respondents described the complexity of assembling and submitting proper documents, and the resulting delays. One respondent said:

“Submitting documents is very hard. I was asked to submit pay stubs which I didn't have, because I was self-employed. No one told me to write a letter explaining how I support myself at the beginning, because of this issue I had to apply twice and it took me 4 months to get SNAP. Also, I used the application on my smart phone to submit my documents, but it turned out that either the application is not working or no one bothered to check. This issue also delayed my application.”

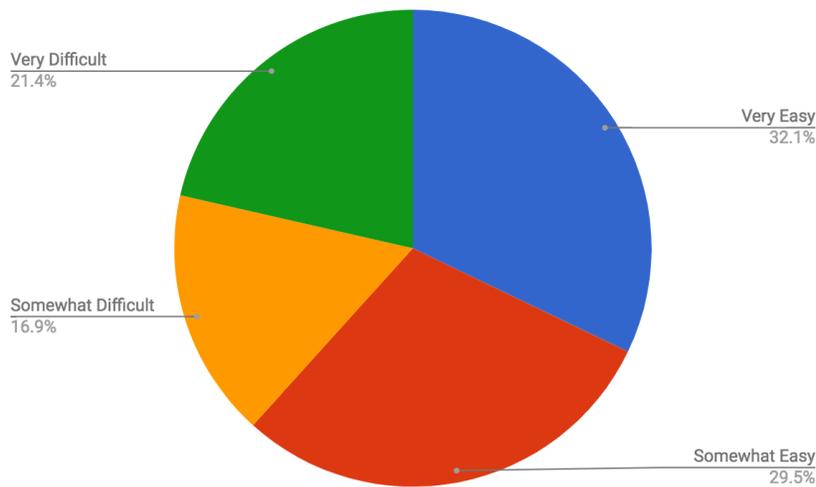
Figure X. Responses to question about ease or Difficulty of “submitting the required documentation”



A number of respondents expressed frustration with the application interview process. Some of the frustration was the result of delays, insufficient information about what is required, and the logistical difficulty of submitting applications at a SNAP facility. As one respondent explained:

“It is difficult to take the telephone interview. They tell you one time, call another time sometimes even a week later and if you miss the call you have to apply again. There is a very large queue in the center and the only way to get the service after hours of wait is that around 50-100 people, who were before you in the queue, have already left because of time. If you have to go there with a baby it is very difficult to keep them quiet for hours. And then officers tell you to take control of your child because they cannot work.”

Figure 22. Responses to question about ease or Difficulty of “Completing the application interview”



Several respondents reported that SNAP staff were unhelpful, rude, or belittling. In the words of one respondent, “The workers always a nasty attitude, and for some reason always lose my documents. Even though I need the help really bad the employees who are supposed to help us do a great job in shunning us away as if we are stealing.” Another applicant considered not applying because of the treatment received:

“The staff deters you from applying by belittling you during your interview process. I felt very uncomfortable during the telephone interview because the interviewer kept asking

me why did it take me so long to apply. I almost withdrew my application because I was treated as if I didn't deserve the help requested to feed my family. It's hard enough coming to the realization that you may need to ask for government assistance but to make the applicant feel as if they should beg for help shouldn't be protocol.”

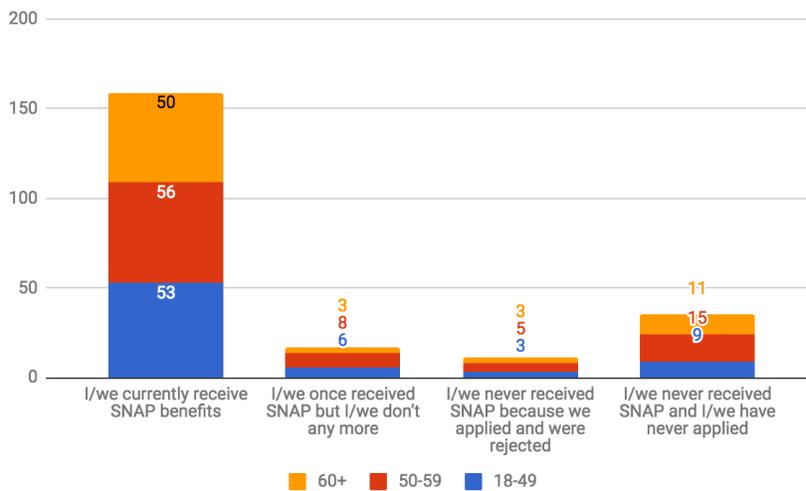
Survey of Low-Income Adults in General Population

To better understand the issues facing low-income individuals, HFA administered an in-person survey to 224 adults to elicit information about their perceptions of SNAP and their experiences during the process of applying for SNAP benefits.

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 224 respondents, 71% were currently receiving SNAP benefits. Approximately 16% had neither applied for nor received SNAP. Seventeen respondents (8%) had received SNAP in the past but no longer participated in the program, and 11 (5%) had applied for SNAP but had been rejected. Of those who never applied for SNAP and never received SNAP, about half (45.7%) thought they (or their household) were ineligible, and 20% said they simply didn't want to apply for SNAP benefits.

Figure 23. SNAP Experiences of Survey Participants in Number of Responses by Age



Most respondents identified as Black or Hispanic, as Figure 24 shows. English was the primary language spoken at home for approximately 60% of respondents. The racial and ethnic distribution of respondents was similar to citywide SNAP recipients, as was the gender breakdown shown in Figure 26.³⁰ Approximately two-thirds of respondents were 50 and older, as Figure 27 shows. Nearly 10% identified as LGBTQ or “other,” as Figure 28 indicates.

³⁰ City of New York Mayor's Office of Operations. April 2016. Social Indicators Report. Accessed at <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/Social-Indicators-Report-April-2016.pdf>

Figure 24. Race and Ethnicity of Survey Respondents and Citywide SNAP Recipients

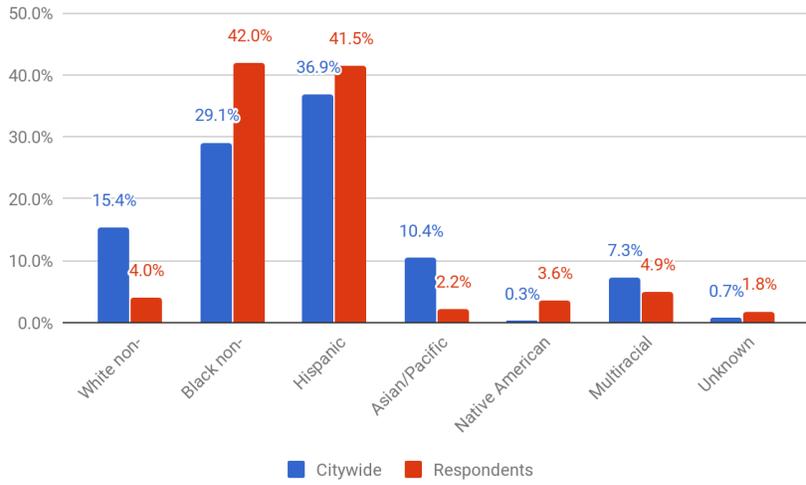


Figure 25. Primary Language Spoken at Home by Survey Respondents

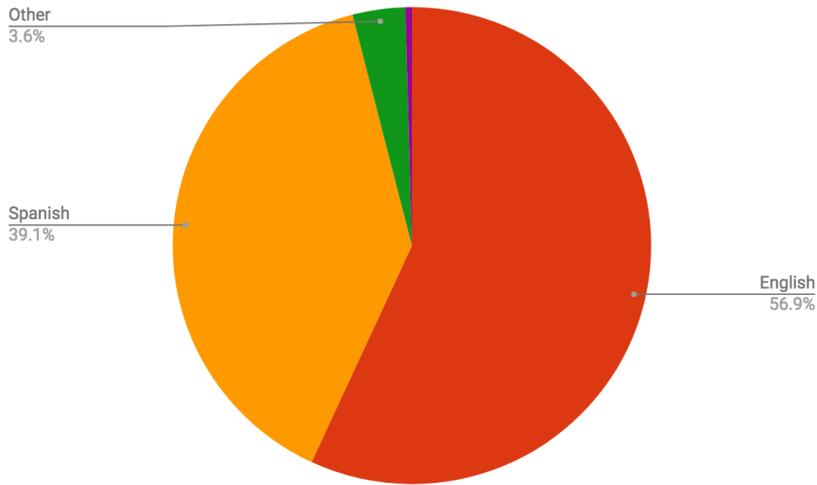


Figure 26. Gender of Survey Respondents

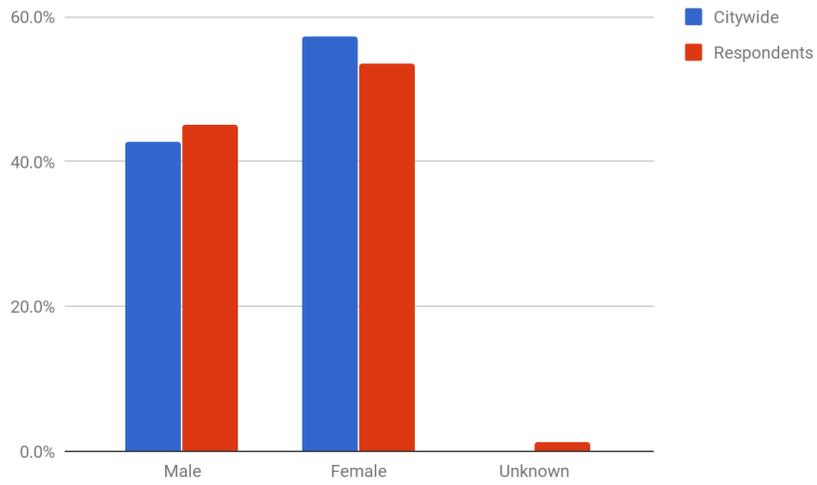


Figure 27. Age of Respondents

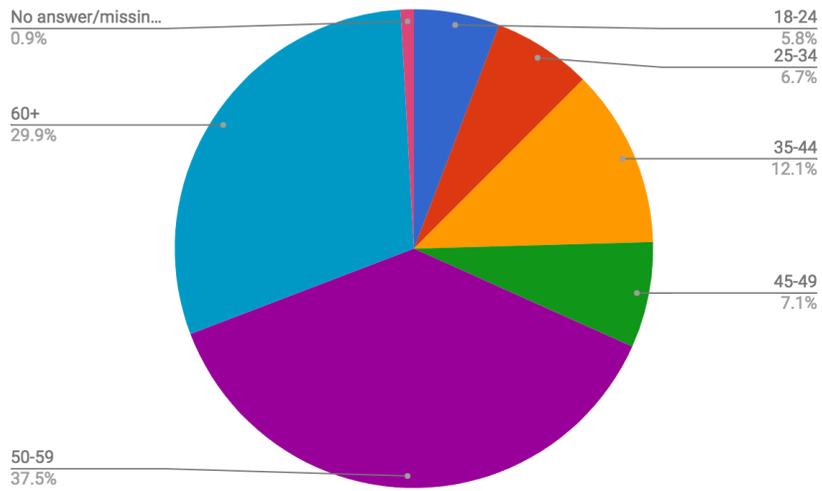
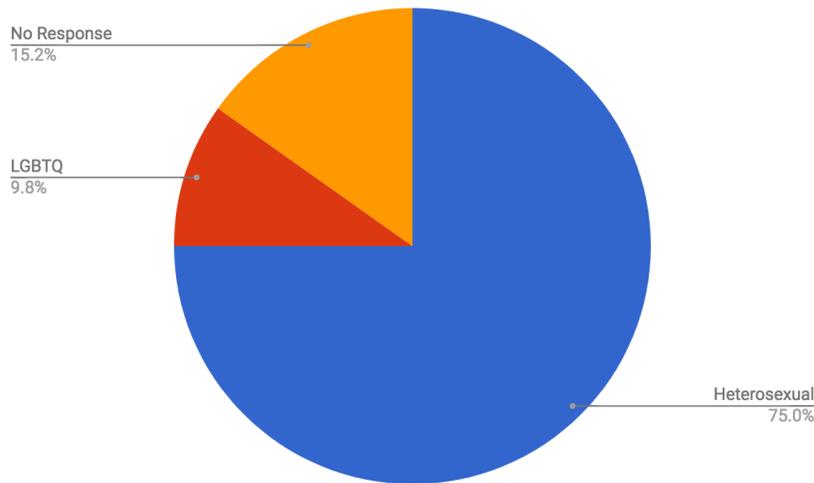


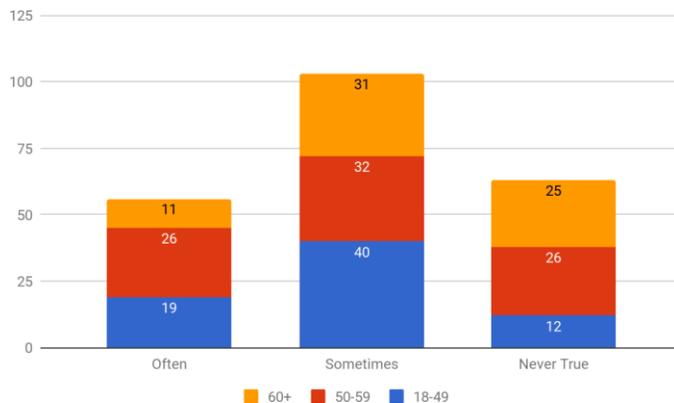
Figure 28. Sexuality of Respondents



Experiences with Food Insecurity

Nationally, 16.2% of all US households reported worrying that food would run out before getting money to buy more, with an additional 13.3% reporting that the food they bought didn't last and they didn't have money to get more.³¹ The HFA survey respondents reported high levels of food insecurity, with nearly half (46%) indicating that they "sometimes worried" that food would run out before they received money to purchase more, and 28% reported being "often worried." Food insecurity did not vary significantly by SNAP participation status.

Figure 29. Responses to statement: "In the last year, the food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more"



³¹ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2016, AP-077, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2017. Table S-5.

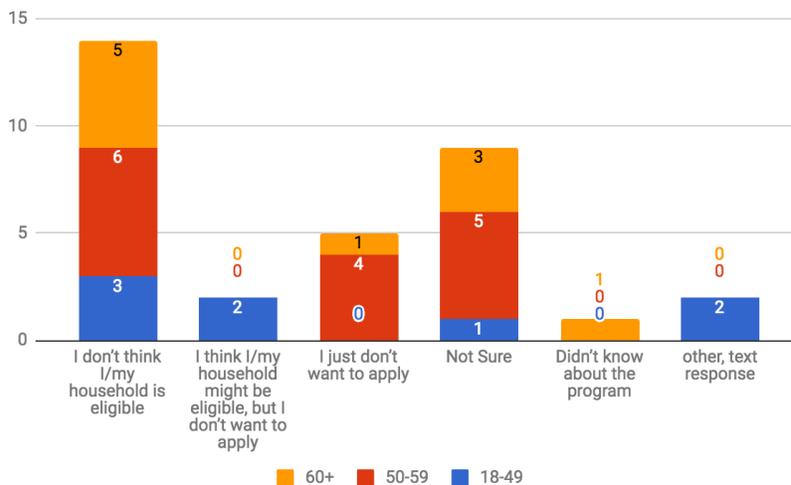
About half of the respondents (51.8%) who often or sometimes worried about food security (whether food would run out before having money for more, or experiencing food not lasting before having money to buy more) were receiving SNAP benefits at the time of the survey. Only 3% of respondents (n=7) who reported that they had applied for SNAP but had been rejected indicated that they worried about food security.

Table 8. Food Insecurity and SNAP Experience in Number of Survey Respondents

	Currently Receive SNAP	No Longer Receive SNAP	Never Received SNAP - Rejected	Never Received SNAP - Never Applied
Often Worried Whether Food Would Run Out	40	4	3	11
Sometimes Worried Whether Food Would Run Out	76	8	4	14
Never Worried Whether Food Would Run Out	41	6	4	11

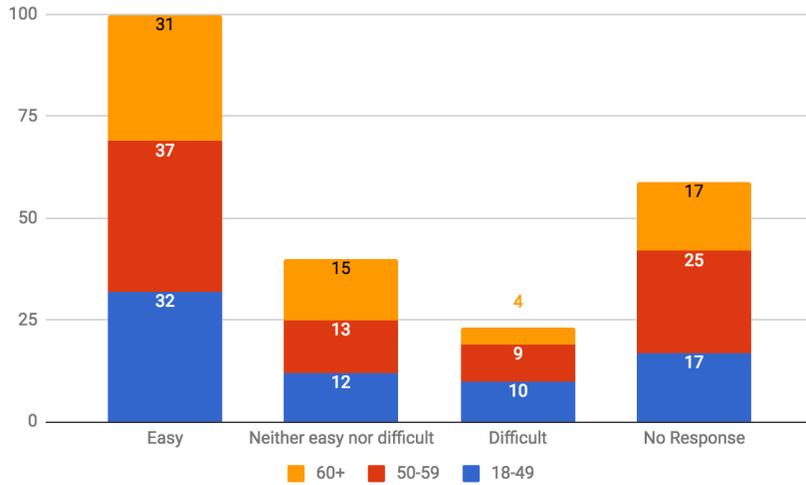
Of the 224 respondents, 36 reported that they never received SNAP and never applied for the program. The primary reason (n=14) was the perception that one’s household was ineligible, with 5 explaining that they believed their income was too high for SNAP and 3 indicating that they thought their immigration status disqualified them.

Figure 30. Reasons for Not Applying for SNAP



For respondents currently receiving SNAP benefits, most found the process “easy” or “neither easy nor difficult” when they first applied for SNAP, as Figures 31 to 34 illustrate. Approximately 45% reported it was easy learning how to get benefits, with similar percentages reporting that it was easy to assemble qualifying documents, submit paper and online applications, interacting with HRA and agency staff, completing the interview process, and applying at non-HRA sites.

Figure 31. Ease or difficulty learning how to get SNAP Benefits (among those currently receiving SNAP)



As the data from HFA’s online survey suggests, a particularly difficult part of the process concerns the paperwork required to apply. Fifteen percent of respondents reported that assembling the required documentation was difficult, and 12% reported that submitting a paper application was difficult.

Figure 32. Ease or difficulty assembling required documents (among those currently receiving SNAP)

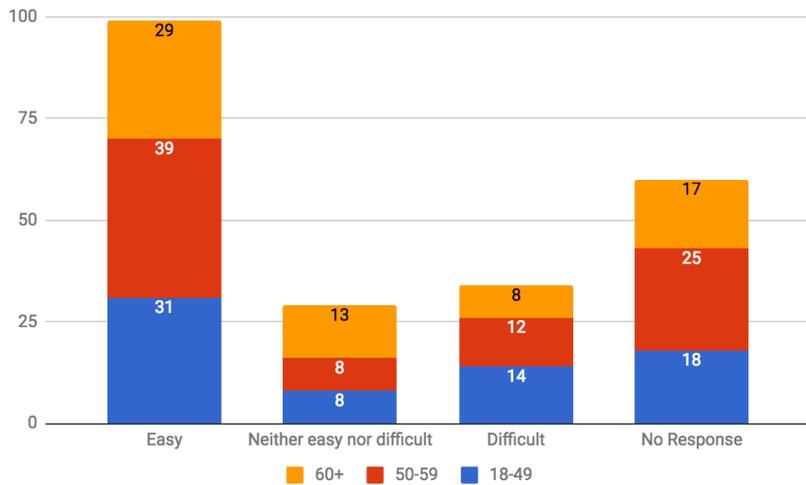
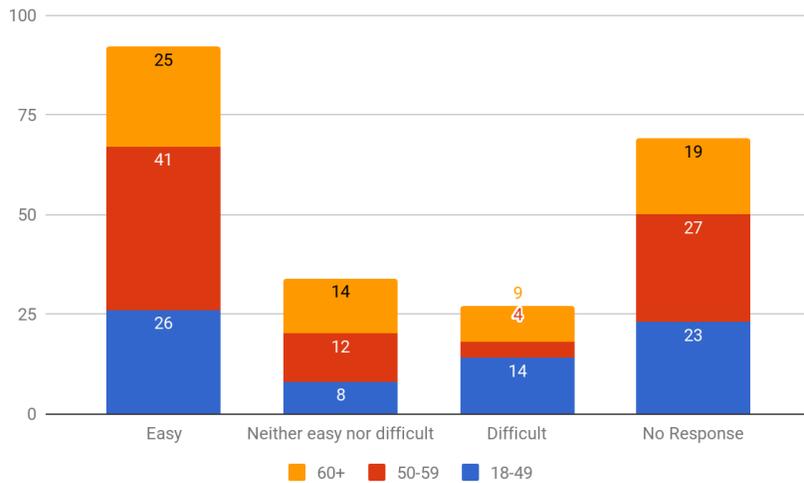
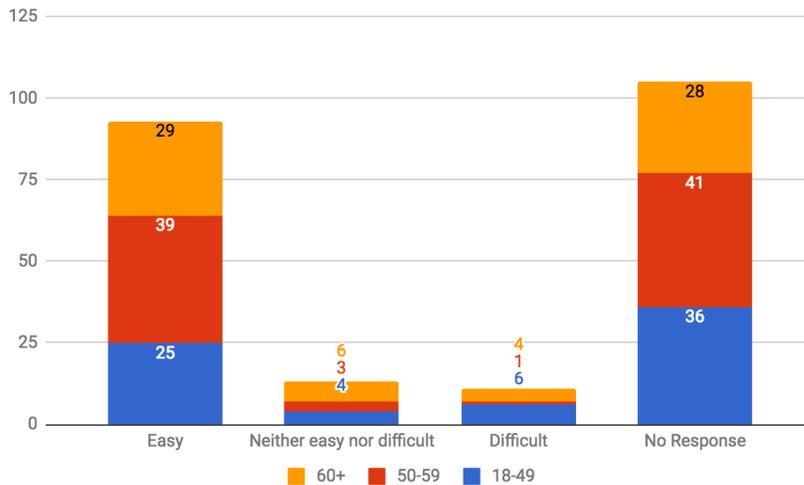


Figure 33. Ease or difficulty submitting a paper application (among those currently receiving SNAP)



Few respondents indicated that they submitted an online SNAP application. Those who had used the online application found the process to be easy.

Figure 34. Ease or difficulty submitting an application online or with an app (among those currently receiving SNAP)



With respect to interactions with HRA employees, most respondents found that they were able to get their questions answered quickly and accurately, and that staff were respectful and helpful, and spoke their language. The process of interacting with HRA was reported to be difficult by a small but not insignificant number of the respondents. About 17% found the process of getting an appointment with HRA difficult, nearly 13% reported difficulty finding the right HRA office to go to, and 11% said it was difficult to get questions answered quickly and accurately.

Figure 35. Ease or difficulty getting an appointment with HRA (among those currently receiving SNAP)

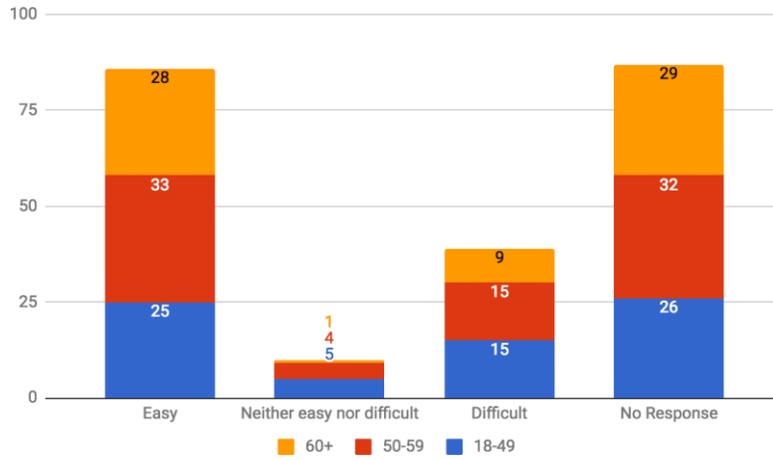


Figure 36. Ease or difficulty finding the right HRA office (among those currently receiving SNAP)

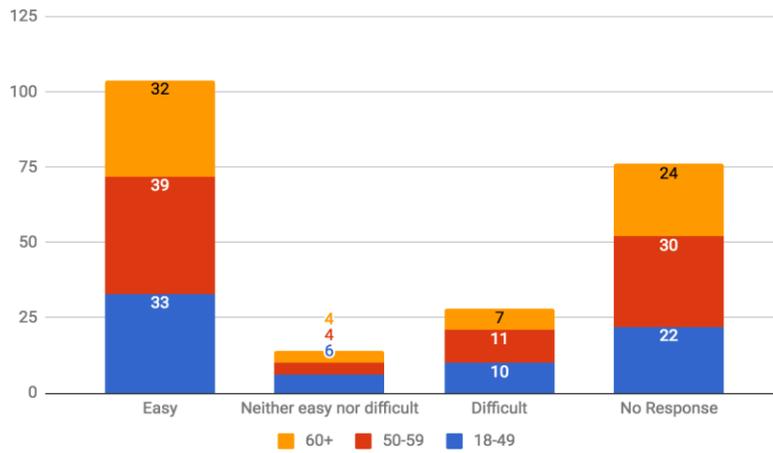


Figure 37. Ease or Difficulty Understanding Who to Speak to in the HRA Office(s) (among those currently receiving SNAP)

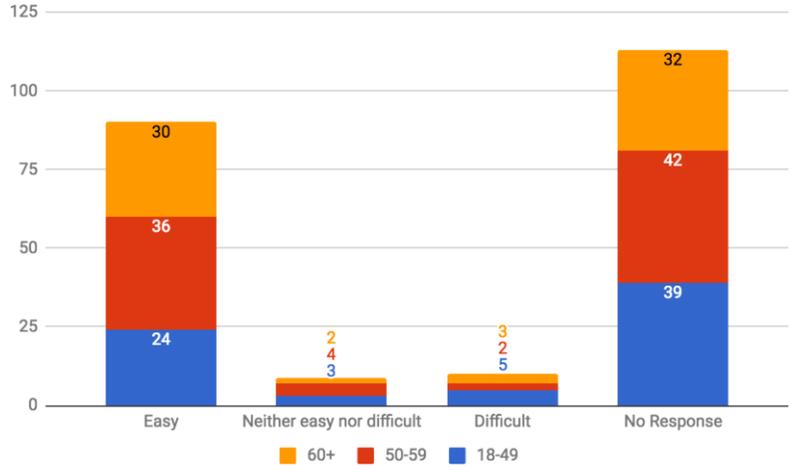


Figure 38. Ease or Difficulty Completing an In-Person Interview (among those currently receiving SNAP)

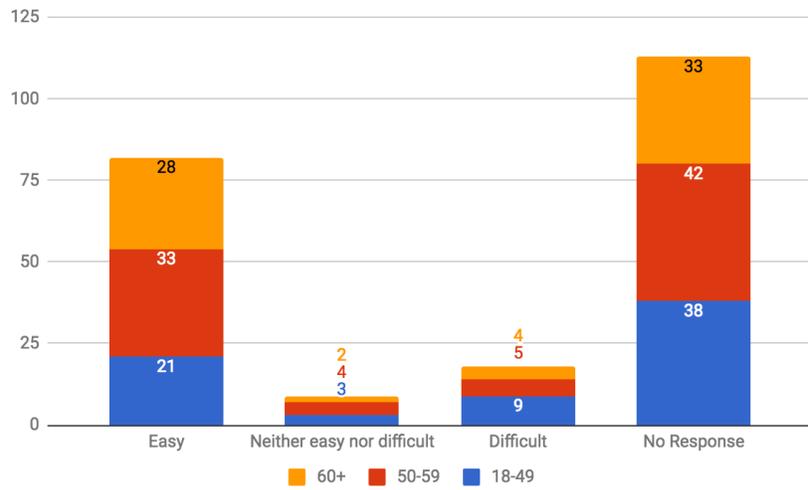


Figure 39. Ease or difficulty completing a telephone interview (among those currently receiving SNAP)

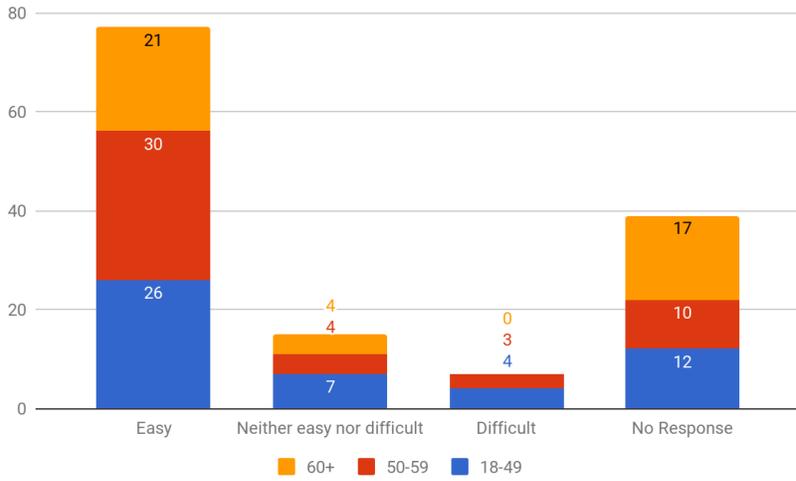


Figure 40. Ease or difficulty applying at a non-HRA site (among those currently receiving SNAP)

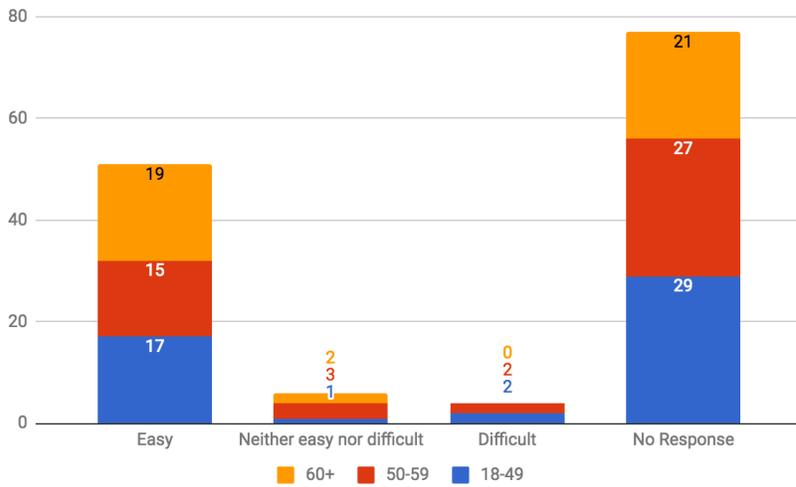


Figure 41. Ease or difficulty “getting my questions answered quickly and accurately” (among those currently receiving SNAP)

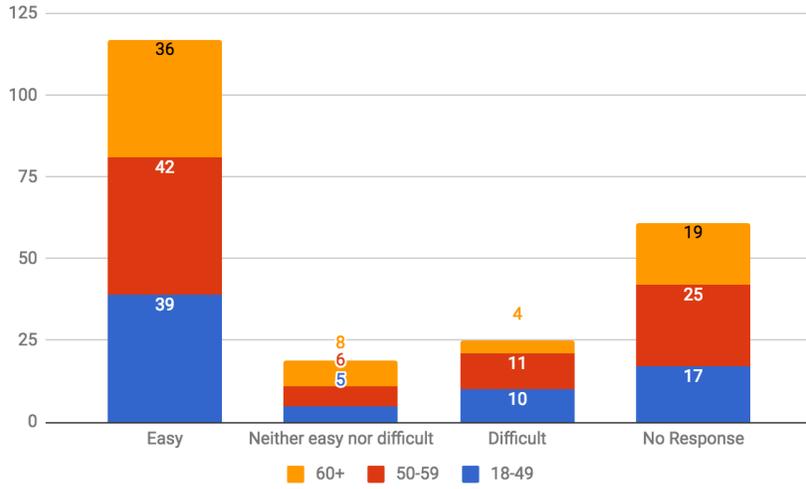


Figure 42. Ease or Difficulty Finding an HRA Employee who was Respectful and Helpful (among those currently receiving SNAP)

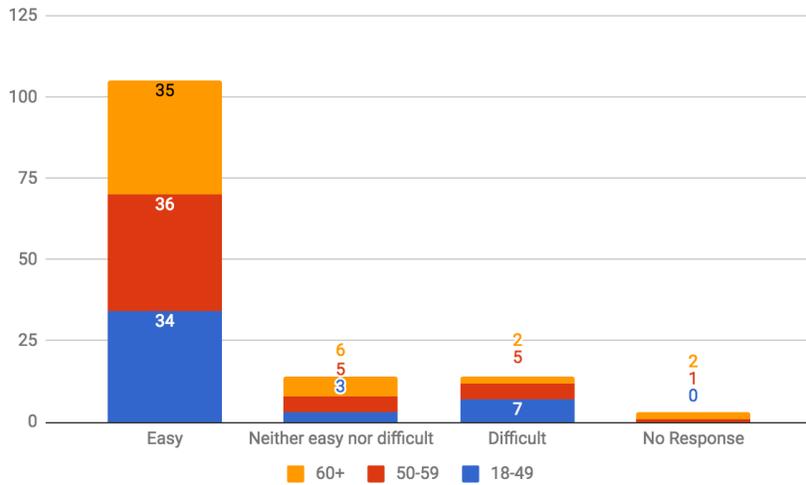
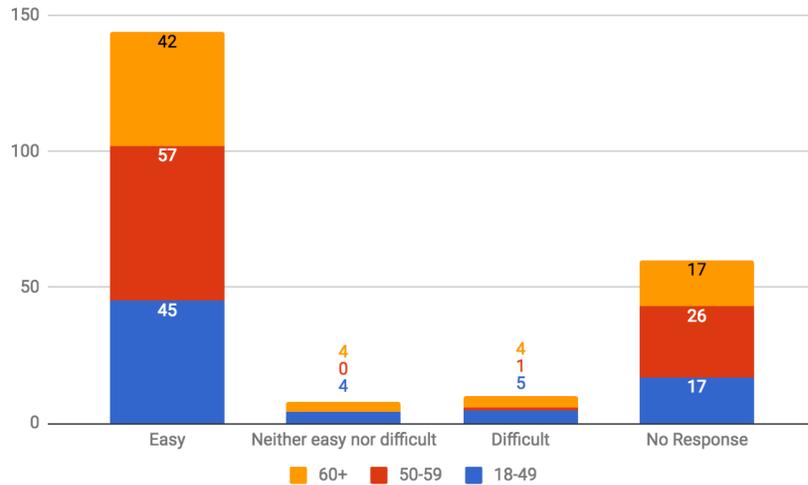


Figure 43. Ease or Difficulty Finding an HRA Employee who Spoke my Language (among those currently receiving SNAP)



Respondents were also asked an open-ended question about whether anything else made it “easy or difficult to apply for SNAP for the first time.” The responses were not consistent. Five individuals offered positive comments. Among the difficulties others noted included language barriers, the challenge of getting questions answered, poor treatment by staff, the loss of documents, difficulty communicating by telephone, and the complexities of applying while living in a shelter.

Only a small number of the respondents who had received SNAP in the past but were no longer receiving benefits (n=11) chose to complete responses about the ease or difficulty with the recertification or re-application process (n=7). Similarly, there were only a small number of responses by those who never received SNAP and never applied (n=36) making it difficult to draw conclusions about why these individuals chose not to apply. Of those who answered questions about not choosing to apply, 13 indicated that they didn’t think they were eligible, 2 thought there were eligible but did not want to apply, and 6 simply said they did not want to apply at all.

Analysis and Conclusions

The analysis shows that New York City's sharp decline in the number and prevalence of SNAP participants between 2012 and 2016, like state and national trends, is mostly correlated with a drop in unemployment and poverty. To the extent that national economic recovery and municipal policies to reduce poverty, raise wages, and create new jobs has reduced the need for SNAP, this is a positive outcome. However, the data also suggest that focusing on the overall SNAP participation rates may mask structural issues that have limited access to SNAP among those qualified for the benefit, contributing to unnecessarily high levels of food insecurity and hunger. Additionally, federal law mandates very low eligibility thresholds, which means that significant numbers of low-income families may be unable to afford a sufficient supply of food but still earn too much to qualify for SNAP.

Closing the Eligibility Gap

Our analysis examined participation levels and prevalence of SNAP participation, but did not independently estimate the percentage of eligible New Yorkers who are not receiving SNAP. However, HRA participation estimates show that in 2015 approximately 72.5% of eligible people participated in SNAP. Roughly 640,000 New Yorkers are likely to be eligible for but not receiving SNAP benefits.

HRA has launched several initiatives to close this gap, including: a new website (ACCESS HRA) and mobile app designed to make it easier for people to get information about SNAP, apply, and submit applications without having to go to a benefits office; on-demand interviews to make recertification easier; a public awareness campaign about the value of SNAP and other public benefits; outreach to encourage those who start but do not complete applications or recertification processes to do so; and efforts to reach out to older adults who qualify for SNAP but are not participating in the program.^{32,33} Identifying impending demographic changes, such as the aging of the city's population, and federal policy changes, such as increased enforcement of immigration regulations, may require finding new ways to reach out to and encourage specific segments of the SNAP-eligible population to avail themselves of SNAP benefits. The city should continue and accelerate such helpful efforts.

Addressing Neighborhood-Level Dynamics

³² City of New York. New York City Government Poverty Measures 2005-2015. pg. 60. Accessed at <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/opportunity/poverty-in-nyc/poverty-measure.page>

³³ City of New York. Department for the Aging. Age-Friendly NYC: New Commitments For A City For All Ages. Accessed at http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/downloads/pdf/age_friendly/AgeFriendlyNYC2017.pdf

This study illustrates widely varying changes in SNAP prevalence by neighborhood. Some communities, like Bushwick or Washington Heights, experienced decreases of more than one-quarter, while Brownsville and Bayside had 10% growth in the prevalence of SNAP participants. Understanding SNAP dynamics at the community scale, including an analysis of the impact of economic and demographic changes on SNAP prevalence, would facilitate interventions targeting specific populations (e.g., recent immigrants, older adults) and enable predictions of the effects of future shifts in development (e.g., as a result of neighborhood rezoning) on SNAP participation.

Responding to Ongoing Administrative Barriers

The online and in-person surveys of SNAP applicants and participants revealed a number of real and perceived barriers to SNAP, from the complexity of the application or recertification process to the stigma of receiving and using SNAP benefits. Responses to HRA's online survey showed that respondents found the application process complicated, cumbersome, and to some respondents demeaning. However, given the low response rate these findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of SNAP participants.

HFA's survey of SNAP participants found that, despite recent administrative improvements by HRA, the process of learning about SNAP, assembling documents, and interacting with agency staff remains difficult or "neither easy nor difficult" for about half of the respondents. Approximately 45% reported it was easy learning how to get benefits, with similar percentages reporting that it was easy to assemble qualifying documents, submit paper and online applications, interact with HRA and agency staff, complete the interview process, and apply at non-HRA sites.

These obstacles may not impede those most in need of SNAP but may hinder individuals who are "on the margins" -- those who are uncertain of whether they actually qualify, who are afraid of applying because of immigration fears, who perceive (or think others perceive) SNAP as shameful, who expect to receive a small SNAP benefit, or who have limited organizational and cognitive skills. Efforts to make the SNAP application and recertification process less of a hurdle for this population through targeted outreach, redesigning the user experience at HRA offices, and exploring other mechanisms to encourage eligible non-participants to enroll would increase the number of program participants.

Policies to Increase SNAP Participation

Advocates have been focusing on resisting draconian cuts to SNAP in the Trump Administration's fiscal year 2019 budget³⁴ and in recent House budget proposals.³⁵ But in addition to responding to these imminent threats, it is important to recommend changes to the program that would expand participation to alleviate hunger, food insecurity, and malnourishment. The study's findings suggest a number of potential policy responses at the federal, state, and municipal level that would improve program effectiveness, increase eligibility, and ease the process of applying for benefits to which people are entitled.

At the federal level, calibrating benefits to USDA's low-cost or moderate-cost food plans instead of the Thrifty Food Plan would increase benefit amounts to reflect more realistic household food costs, and would encourage more SNAP-eligible individuals to apply for benefits.

Additional policy changes to increase participation in SNAP include:

- Increasing eligibility to 200% of the poverty line, thereby expanding the number of low-income working people able to receive SNAP;
- Removing restrictions that prevent many legal immigrants from receive SNAP;
- Eliminating arbitrary cut-offs for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD);
- Dropping the requirement for an interview to receive SNAP benefits; and
- Extending recertification periods to reduce the burden of receiving SNAP.
- Combine SNAP enrollment with enrollment for multiple other food and support programs, as Hunger Free America has previously proposed in detail.

One strategy for increasing SNAP eligibility at the state level is to expand the use of broad-based categorical eligibility, a policy in which households are considered categorically eligible for SNAP because they qualify for other public benefits. Another approach is to increase state funding to nonprofit organizations to conduct outreach to eligible individuals and to facilitate the application process. Including such funding in the state's SNAP outreach plan would enable USDA to match these funds.

The city could take steps to increase outreach to potentially eligible individuals, ease the process of applying for SNAP, and ensure that SNAP applicants are not inhibited from applying for benefits by difficult procedures or unwelcoming staff. These changes include:

- Providing more extensive customer service training for all front-line HRA staff and ensuring that good customer service is rewarded;
- Conducting more extensive media and grass-roots outreach to increase the use of efficient online application systems that free up staff to engage applicants who are unable to use online portals;

³⁴ Dean, Stacey. 2018. President's Budget Would Cut and Radically Restructure SNAP Food Benefits. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/presidents-budget-would-cut-and-radically-restructure-snap-food-benefits>

³⁵ Rosenbaum, Dottie. 2017. House Budget Targets SNAP for Cuts. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/house-budget-targets-snap-for-cuts>

- Accelerating on-demand access to phone interviews for new applications in addition to their use for recertification; and
- Increasing funding for nonprofits to facilitate SNAP applications, and lobbying the state to include additional funding for this purpose in the state's SNAP outreach plan so that it can be matched by federal dollars.

Appendix A: HRA Online Survey Instrument

[Note: Formatting Has Been Changed]

Email text (to be repeated in all languages for which survey tool is available):

Hunger Free America is conducting a study to better understand New Yorkers experience with the SNAP program. The NYC Department of Social Services is sharing their survey with recent SNAP applicants, so that your voice can be heard. Please click on the link below for a brief, voluntary, and anonymous survey. All questions are optional, and results will be used for research purposes only. Your answers will not affect your case or benefits in any way.

[SURVEY LINK provided by HFA]

Survey tool

1. Did you recently apply for SNAP benefits? O Yes O No [end survey]

First, please tell us a little about yourself and your household.

2. Is anyone in your household under the age of 18? O Yes O No

3. Is anyone in your household an adult over the age of 60? O Yes O No

3. What is your age? _____ years

4. What is your gender? O Male O Female O Other

5. Do you identify as Hispanic and/or Latino? O Yes O No

6. Which of the following best describes your race? Pick all that apply.

- Native American or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White

8. What is the primary language spoken in your home? _____

Next, please tell us about your experience with the SNAP application process.

7. When you applied for SNAP, were the following application steps easy or difficult?

	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult	Don't remember
Understanding what I needed to do.					
Completing the application form.					
Completing the application interview.					
Submitting the required documentation.					

8. How would you rate the customer service provided by SNAP staff?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair

- Poor

9. Are you currently receiving SNAP benefits?

Yes [continue to 10a] No [skip to 10b]

Finally, please tell us more about your views of the SNAP program and your family's food budget.

10a. [current SNAP recipients] Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
With help from SNAP, I am able to afford the healthy food my family needs.				
When I use my SNAP benefits to buy food, I feel shame (or stigma).				
I initially delayed applying for SNAP due to fear related to my immigration status or the status of my family members.				

[SURVEY END]

10b. [not currently receiving SNAP] Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am able to afford the healthy food my family needs.				
If I used SNAP benefits to buy food, I would feel shame (or stigma).				
I initially delayed applying for SNAP due to fear related to my immigration status or the status of my family members.				

[SURVEY END]

Please provide any additional feedback/ comments about your experience with applying for SNAP.

Appendix B: HFA In-Person Survey Instrument

[Note: Formatting Has Been Changed]

Survey No. _____

We are going to ask you a series of voluntary questions about you and your household's experience with a government program over the past five years for those who are in need of food assistance. You may at any time refuse to answer questions or stop the survey. Upon completion of the survey you will receive a MetroCard for a round trip fare.

General Screening Questions

1. SNAP (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps) provides benefits that help people pay for food. Which of these statements best describes you and/or your household's experience with SNAP?
 - a. I/we currently receive SNAP benefits (Proceed to Q2a)
 - b. I/we once received SNAP but I/we don't any more (Proceed to Q3a)
 - c. I/we never received SNAP because we applied and were rejected (Proceed to Q4a)
 - d. I/we never received SNAP and I/we have never applied (Proceed to Q5a)
 - e. I don't know or don't want to say (END INTERVIEW)

Questions for those who are currently receiving SNAP

2a. How easy or difficult were each of the following parts of the process the first time you applied for SNAP?

	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	No Response/ Don't Know	N/A
Learning how to get benefits					
Assembling required documents					
Submitting a paper application					
Submitting an application online or with an app					
Getting an appointment with HRA					
Finding the right HRA office					
Understanding who to speak to in the HRA office(s)					
Completing an in-person interview					
Completing a telephone interview					
Applying at a non-HRA site					
Getting my questions answered quickly and accurately					
Finding and HRA employee who was respectful and helpful					
Finding an HRA employee who spoke my language					

2b. Did anything else make it easy or difficult to apply for SNAP for the first time?

2c. After receiving SNAP benefits, did you re-apply/recertify to continuing getting benefits?

- a. Yes (Proceed to Q 2e)
- b. No (Proceed to Q 2d)

2d. Why didn't you try to re-certify/reapply?

- a. My/our income was too high
- b. I/we decided I/we did not want to keep participating
- c. I/we were removed from SNAP before it was time to recertify/re-apply
- d. I/we didn't know we had to recertify/re-apply
- e. Don't know/no answer

(Proceed to Q9)

2e. How easy or difficult were each of the following parts of the SNAP recertification/re-application process?

	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	No Response/Don't Know	N/A
Knowing when it was time to re-certify/reapply					
Learning the recertification process					
Assembling and submitting required documents					
Submitting forms in person					
Submitting forms online or with an app					
Getting an appointment with HRA					
Finding the right HRA office					
Understanding who to speak to in the HRA office(s)					
Completing an in-person interview					
Completing a telephone interview					
Getting my questions answered quickly and accurately					
Finding and HRA employee who was respectful and helpful					
Finding an HRA employee who spoke my language					

2f. Did anything else make it easy or difficult to recertify/re-apply for SNAP?

(Proceed to Q9)

Questions for those who had SNAP but don't any more

3a. How easy or difficult were each of the following parts of the process the first time you applied for SNAP?

	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	No Response/Don't know	N/A
Knowing when it was time to re-certify/reapply					
Learning the recertification process					
Assembling and submitting required documents					
Submitting forms in person					
Submitting forms online or with an app					
Getting an appointment with HRA					
Finding the right HRA office					
Understanding who to speak to in the HRA office(s)					
Completing an in-person interview					
Completing a telephone interview					
Getting my questions answered quickly and accurately					
Finding and HRA employee who was respectful and helpful					
Finding an HRA employee who spoke my language					

3b. Did anything else make it easy or difficult for you/your family to apply for SNAP for the first time?

3c. After receiving SNAP benefits, did you ever have to recertify/re-apply to continuing getting benefits?

- a. Yes (Proceed to Q 3e)
- b. No (Proceed to Q 3d)

3d. Why didn't you try to recertify/reapply to keep getting SNAP?

- a. My/our income was too high
- b. I/we decided I/we did not want to keep participating
- c. I/we decided I/we did not want to keep participating because of my/our immigration status
- d. I/we were removed from SNAP before it was time to recertify/re-apply
- e. I/we didn't know we had to recertify/re-apply
- f. Don't know/no answer

(Proceed to Q9)

3e. How easy or difficult were each of the following parts of the SNAP recertification/re-application process?

	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	No Response/Don't Know	N/A
Knowing when it was time to re-certify/reapply					
Learning the recertification process					
Assembling and submitting required documents					
Submitting forms in person					
Submitting forms online or with an app					
Getting an appointment with HRA					
Finding the right HRA office					
Understanding who to speak to in the HRA office(s)					
Completing an in-person interview					
Completing a telephone interview					
Getting my questions answered quickly and accurately					
Finding an HRA employee who was respectful and helpful					
Finding an HRA employee who spoke my language					
Knowing when it was time to re-certify/reapply					

3f. After recertifying, did you continue to receive SNAP?

- a. Yes (Proceed to Q6)
- b. No (Proceed to Q3g)

3g. Were you told why you were not allowed to keep receiving SNAP?

- a. Yes (Proceed to Q3h)
 - b. No (Proceed to Q6)
- 3h. Why were you not allowed to keep receiving SNAP?
- a. My/our income was too high
 - b. There were errors on my paperwork
 - c. I wasn't able to provide all the documentation needed
 - d. I didn't meet work requirements
 - e. I missed an interview
 - f. Other (Explain: _____)
- (Proceed to Q9)

Questions for those who once applied for SNAP but were rejected

4a. How easy or difficult were each of the following parts of the process when you most recently applied for SNAP?

	Easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Difficult	No Response/Don't Know	N/A
Learning how to get benefits					
Assembling required documents					
Submitting a paper application					
Submitting an application online or with an app					
Getting an appointment with HRA					
Finding the right HRA office					
Understanding who to speak to in the HRA office(s)					
Completing an in-person interview					
Completing a telephone interview					
Applying at a non-HRA site					
Getting my questions answered quickly and accurately					
Finding an HRA employee who was respectful and helpful					
Finding an HRA employee who spoke my language					
Learning how to get benefits					

4b. Did anything else make it easy or difficult for you/your family to apply for SNAP for the first time?

4c. Were you told why your application for SNAP was turned down?

- a. Yes (Proceed to Q4d)
 - b. No
- 4d. What reason were you given for your application being turned down?
- a. My/our income was too high
 - b. I did not provide all the documentation needed
 - c. I didn't meet work requirements
 - d. I did not complete the required interview

Other (Explain: _____) (Proceed to Q9)

2	\$401	\$1,736	\$20,832
3	\$505	\$2,184	\$26,208
4	\$608	\$2,633	\$31,596
5	\$712	\$3,081	\$36,972
6	\$816	\$3,530	\$42,360
7	\$919	\$3,980	\$47,760
8	\$1,023	\$4,430	\$53,160

HH#: _____ Income lower? Y N NA

(Proceed to Q9)

8. For those with SSI/SSD income, 60+, or childcare costs. Please take a look at the table below. Based on the number of people in your household, would you say your household makes less than the amount in the table?

HH	Weekly	Monthly	Annually
1	\$457	\$1,980	\$23,760
2	\$617	\$2,670	\$32,040
3	\$776	\$3,360	\$40,320
4	\$935	\$4,050	\$48,600
5	\$1,095	\$4,740	\$56,880
6	\$1,254	\$5,430	\$65,160
7	\$1,414	\$6,122	\$73,464
8	\$1,574	\$6,815	\$81,780

HH#: _____ Income lower? Y N NA

WIC Screener

9. Which of these best describes your household?

- a. Someone is pregnant
- b. There is only one child under the age of 5
- c. There is more than one child under 5
- d. No one is pregnant
- e. There are no children under 5
- f. No answer

10. Do you or anyone in your household participate in the Women, Infant, and Children Program (WIC)?

Y N I have never heard of WIC (If yes, proceed to Q12)

11. Why do you not participate in WIC?

- a. I don't think our family is eligible
- b. I think the value of WIC benefits isn't worth the hassle
- c. There are no conveniently located WIC clinics
- d. The WIC clinics near me are not open at convenient times
- e. Being on WIC requires too many appointments
- f. I don't like the foods you can get with WIC
- g. I don't want others to know that I am using WIC
- h. Other. Please specify: _____

Food Security Screener

Would you say these statements are often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last year?

12. "In the last year, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more".

Often Sometimes Never True

13. "In the last year, the food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more."

Sometimes Never True Often

14. Does anyone in your household receive any of the following government benefits? Choose all that apply:

- a. Social Security
- b. Medicare
- c. Medicaid
- d. Disability/SSDI
- e. Unemployment
- f. TANF/Cash Assistance
- g. Veteran's Pension/VA Benefits
- h. Don't know
- i. Not sure/no answer

Demographic Questions

15. What is your zip code? _____

16. What is your age?

- a. Under 18
- b. 18-24
- c. 25-34
- d. 35-44
- e. 45-49
- f. 50-59
- g. 60 or older
- h. No answer

17. Which of these best describes your gender?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Prefer to self-describe: _____
- d. No answer

18. Do you identify as any of the following? Select all that apply:

- a. Heterosexual
- b. Lesbian/Gay
- c. Bisexual
- d. Transgender
- e. Gender nonconforming
- f. Other: _____
- g. No answer

19. Do you identify as Hispanic and/or Latino

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. No answer

20. Which of the following describes your race? Choose all that apply:

- a. Native American or Alaska Native
- b. Asian
- c. Black or African-American
- d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- e. White/Caucasian
- f. More than one race
- g. Other _____
- h. No answer

21. In your home, what is the primary language you speak? _____

ABOUT HUNGER FREE AMERICA

Hunger Free America (formerly known as the New York City Coalition Against Hunger) is a national nonprofit group building a nonpartisan, grass-roots movement to enact the policies and programs needed to end domestic hunger and ensure that all Americans have sufficient access to nutritious food.

HFA is both an advocacy and direct service organization. The organization runs a national AmeriCorps*VISTA program, manages the National Hunger Hotline on behalf of USDA, enables families to access SNAP and other benefits, promotes strategic volunteerism, and increases access to child nutrition programs, while also conducting research, issuing policy recommendations, communicating with the public about the importance of these efforts, and engaging in community organization to advance our policy agenda, especially by empowering low-income Americans to speak out on their own beholds.

Our long-term goal is not just to ameliorate the problem, but also to build the people's movement necessary to enact the economic and public policies needed to end hunger entirely. Given that hunger drains our economy and tears at our moral and civic fabric, we know that eliminating it will boost the nation both economically and spiritually. Towards that end, we've adopted the motto: "Ending hunger lifts us all."

ABOUT THE CUNY FOOD POLICY INSTITUTE

The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute was approved by the CUNY Board of Trustees in May 2016. As a CUNY-wide initiative, the Institute applies the expertise of CUNY faculty in public health, nutrition, sociology, urban planning, law and other disciplines. Supported by the skills, commitment and passion of CUNY students, we conduct research, education and action projects that can contribute to solving the food problems of New York City. Through exchanges with scholars, policy makers and practitioners in other urban areas around the world, we contribute insights on fair and effective food policies.

The Institute works to: develop, improve, and evaluate policies and programs that support nutrition and health equity; promote economic growth and social justice through a food sector that supports good jobs, health, and sustainable urban environments; convene and support CUNY faculty and students with interests in food policy, food studies and food justice; improve food security and nutritional well-being for CUNY students and staff; and advance fair and effective urban food policies for New York, the nation and globally in partnership with public officials, community organizations, and academics.