

It Takes a City to Feed a City: One Year of Feeding New Yorkers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

March 2021





We will remember the 'Year of the Pandemic' for how distant we were from each other.

We couldn't hug. We couldn't celebrate birthdays or graduations together. We couldn't even join hands at funerals. The virus cut us off from our neighbors, our loved ones, and even from the strangers who make life in New York City so vibrant.

But in many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic also brought us closer than we've ever been.

The clanging of pots and pans echoed in unison from windows, fire escapes, and stoops to honor frontline healthcare workers. We donned masks and stayed six feet apart in stores as a gesture of profound kindness to our fellow New Yorkers.

And when the pandemic caused food insecurity to surge across the city and lines snaked for blocks outside of food pantries and soup kitchens, New Yorkers came together once again to stand with and help feed their neighbors.



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At one of our recent pop-up distributions, food was coming straight off a City Harvest truck. One of our clients had had an accident and three kids and no work at all, and he was telling me, 'This food every week is what keeps me alive.'

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Joel Matos, President & Operating Director, Holding Hands Ministries

If there's one lesson we've learned during the pandemic, it's that it takes a city to feed a city.

We saw nearly six million more visits to the network of 400 food pantries and soup kitchens we serve, compared to the same period the year before (rising from 12.7 million to 18.5 million visits, a 46% increase). Children were by far the fastest growing age-group accessing emergency food, with 5.6 million children being served by our network agencies during the pandemic, up from 3.4 million during the same period the year before.

From March 2020 through January 2021, **we rescued and delivered 124.7 million pounds of food, more than double the amount over the same period the year before (62.1 million pounds)**. The growth over such a short period of time has been astronomical—and our projections of food needed in the city continue to outpace all expectations.

For context, in FY20 (which ran from July 2019 through June 2020), we originally planned to rescue and deliver 64 million pounds of food—more than any year in City Harvest's nearly four-decade history.

The surge in need for the final three months of that fiscal year as the pandemic took hold required us to rescue and deliver 82.3 million pounds—a 29% increase over what we had planned.

As we began planning for FY21 (which began in July 2020 and ends in June 2021), we initially expected to see a similar elevated need through the end of 2020 and planned to rescue and deliver 89 million pounds this fiscal year, another record amount for the organization.

As the pandemic dragged on and demand has continued to grow, however, we now expect to rescue and deliver 144 million pounds of nutritious food, free of charge, in FY21—more than double (125% increase) the amount we planned on in FY20.



More than 2.5 million working-age New Yorkers were already struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic. The virus—and its devastating economic fallout, especially in low-wage industries—pushed many New Yorkers, who had just been holding on, right off the edge.

One in three New Yorkers visited a food pantry in 2020—a 250% increase from before the pandemic, according to a study by Robin Hood. Overall, Feeding America estimated that food insecurity in New York City has ballooned by 44% during the pandemic—and by an almost unimaginable 64% among New York City children. One in three New York City children don't always know where they will get their next meal, up from one in five before the pandemic.



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There are six people in my household and the four adults are unemployed. It has been very hard to be able to eat and especially to feed the children. I used my money to buy food when the pandemic started, and now I have no money to buy any more food. Being able to get food from the City Harvest Mobile Market is a big help for me and my family, and I know that I will be able to feed my family for a few days.

”

Regina, Participant at Queensbridge Mobile Market



As the public health crisis began spiraling out of control in early March 2020, City Harvest—alongside all levels of government, emergency food providers, mutual aid groups, and other community groups—moved quickly to adjust our operations to get food to the people who desperately needed it.

With many of the marginalized communities that we have long served being hit hardest, both by the virus and the resulting economic fallout, food insecurity has surged inequitably across the city. Black and Latinx families nationwide are more than twice as likely as white families to be experiencing food insecurity during this crisis, according to an analysis by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

The five neighborhoods where we operate our nine Mobile Markets—Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn; Northwest Queens; South Bronx; Washington Heights, Manhattan; and the North Shore of Staten Island—already suffered from high rates of food insecurity and unemployment, rooted in decades of policy inequities and systemic failures that have disproportionately hurt communities of color.

Many of these same communities were also hit particularly hard by COVID-19, with higher infection and death rates than whiter neighborhoods. As unemployment remains stubbornly high, we continue to see greater need for food assistance in those communities as well.

With so much of the city's emergency food infrastructure dependent on small food pantries and soup kitchens and the largely elderly volunteer army that keeps them running, nearly a quarter of the agencies we serve closed at some point during the pandemic.





That is why, starting in April 2020, we partnered with local groups to open dozens of Emergency Relief Sites in hard-hit communities across the city, through which we have already provided 19.4 million pounds of food to New Yorkers in need.

In addition to these new sites, the existing network of 400 food pantries and soup kitchens we serve and the nine City Harvest Mobile Markets we run directly have seen a massive increase in demand.

Our agency network has seen 18.5 million visits since the start of the pandemic, a 46% increase over the same period the year prior (12.7 million visits). Our Mobile Markets have served 328,000 people since the start of the pandemic, an 84% increase over the

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I was a temp and lost my job during the pandemic. I find hope and relief in the food given out by City Harvest.

”

Heloise, Participant at Prince Hall Mobile Market

same period the year prior. Our Community Partner Distribution sites have distributed 2.8 million pounds of food, a 110% increase from the same period the year prior (1.3 million).

Some of the agencies we’ve served have experienced truly astonishing increases in demand. Brooklyn’s COPO Food Pantry, for instance, was originally slated to get just 142,000 pounds of food in FY20, and instead received 3.8 million pounds since the pandemic began—26 times as much food as they had anticipated needing to help feed everyone now turning to them.

Even as vaccines begin rolling out and the acute public health crisis begins to fade, the economic impact will likely be with our city for a long time to come. Prior to the pandemic, we were finally reversing the food insecurity surge we saw during the Great Recession. The pandemic erased nearly all the gains made during the preceding decade.

Our projections show that the need is expected to remain elevated. During the second half of 2020, we rescued and delivered 76.2 million pounds of food, more than double the 34 million pounds we rescued and delivered in the same period in 2019. We are currently projecting that we will rescue and deliver 67.8 million pounds in the first six months of 2021, more than we delivered in any full year prior to the pandemic.

City Harvest and our partners will continue to serve the emergency food needs of our city. We are committed to ensuring that every New Yorker—regardless of age, race, religion, ethnicity, neighborhood, or immigration status—has access to the free, nutritious food they need to thrive. But we cannot do it alone. We need smarter, broader, and deeper investment in our food systems from all levels of government and the private sector. And, we can only achieve our mission with the support and partnership of our dedicated friends and supporters who continue to step up with us for our fellow New Yorkers in need.

As the city's first and largest food rescue organization, we remain committed to helping feed our city one day, one meal, one New Yorker at a time—throughout the pandemic and beyond.



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My husband is a construction worker and is currently not working. We have three children and they are growing. They need a lot of food. We need food in our house. This is my first time at the City Harvest Mobile Market, and I feel very grateful and thankful.

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Mariam, Participant at Bed Stuy Mobile Market



City Harvest's Response to COVID-19: By the Numbers

All data is from March 9, 2020 through January 31, 2021

Partnered to open
29 EMERGENCY
food distribution sites in high-need
neighborhoods.



2.2 MILLION
more visits by children to our network
compared to the year before.



84,000 VISITS
to our *Find Food Map* on
our website.

124.7 MILLION
pounds of food delivered, more than
double the amount delivered during the
same period the year prior.

76,550 MASKS
and other PPE delivered to more than
100 agencies citywide.



196,000 MEALS
prepared by restaurants and
delivered to our partner food
pantries and soup kitchens.



125% INCREASE
in the amount of food we will
deliver in FY21, compared to
initial FY20 projections.

Nearly
6 MILLION
more visits to the network of food
pantries and soup kitchens we
serve, compared to same period
the year before.

For more information about our work, visit cityharvest.org



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