

THE

# Unheard Third 2022

## New Yorkers at the Crossroads: Challenges and Opportunities

**Brief**

### The Big Apple's Bitter Bite: Food Hardship in New York City

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#### Executive Summary

Food security remains a pertinent problem in New York City. With food costs increasing by 10.1 percent over the last year<sup>1</sup> and housing costs reaching historic highs in the city,<sup>2</sup> many households, especially low-income households and including those with children, remain worried about where their next meal will come from. This brief takes a close look at the extent and the depth of food insecurity endured by New Yorkers for the past two decades and recommends policies to address the crisis.

Using data from twenty years of the *Unheard Third* Survey, a unique opinion poll of low-income New Yorkers developed and conducted by the Community Service Society of New York (CSS) since 2002, we are able to understand the nature of food hardship in the city. The longer time horizon has allowed us to observe changes in patterns of food hardship vis-à-vis changing economic and political environments. Although the broad trends have not changed much over last two decades—women and communities of color continue to experience higher rates of food insecurity than their white-male counterparts—there have been improvements in the levels of hardship.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which had ripped a hole through the city's economy, along with inflicting an incalculable human toll, had, predictably, increased food hardship to historic highs. Around a third of all city residents and almost two-thirds of all low-income residents said that they experienced food insecurity in 2020. The following year, as government assistance was made available in the form of stimulus checks, expanded Child Tax Credit, expanded Earned Income Tax Credit, and expanded Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, food insecurity declined across the board, including declining for young children.

And yet, we chose to let these benefits expire even before many New Yorkers had found economic security in a post-COVID world. Unsurprisingly, food insecurity rates increased in 2022, reaching alarmingly high rates for the city's Hispanic/Latinx residents and for individuals in low-income households headed by single women.

The report also enumerates policy recommendations at the city, state and federal levels. Finally, we conclude with a list of helpful resources for food assistance and access.

## Key Findings:

- Food insecurity is persistent and prevalent in New York City, affecting around 30 percent of all New Yorkers.
- Over half of low-income New Yorkers endured food hardship in 2022.
  - Around 20 percent of these households endured 'severe' food hardship.
- Food insecurity is at a crisis level for the city's Hispanic/Latinx residents:
  - 60 percent of low-income Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers reported experiencing food hardship.
  - 26 percent of Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers reported experiencing 'severe' food hardship.
  - 48 percent of Hispanic/Latinx women reported experiencing food hardship.
- Low-income households with children tend to have higher rates of food insecurity: 61 percent reported experiencing food hardship.
- Low-income households headed by single females had the highest rates of food hardship with 58 percent reporting that they often endured hunger or had to seek out food donations.
- Respondents from the Bronx had the highest rate of food insecurity—36 percent—while Queens residents had the lowest rates (29 percent).
- Continued high inflation, especially in food prices, is creating pressure on these households who are already experiencing food insecurity.
- Food insecurity rates increased during the pandemic year (2020), but government assistance in 2021 helped alleviate food hardship for most New Yorkers. Food hardship rates increased to their pre-pandemic levels as pandemic-era assistance programs were phased out in 2022.

## Key Recommendations

- The City must increase and baseline the budget for the Human Resource Administration (HRA) to support community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and to streamline benefits applications.
- Increase and baseline funding to adequately staff HRA's Department of Social Services (DSS)—the agency that processes SNAP applications—to ensure applicants receive their benefits with minimal delays.
- Increase and baseline funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).
- Invest an additional \$200 million in Capital funding for the continued redesign of middle and high school cafeterias to make them more modernized and culturally inclusive.
- New York State should follow New York City and provide free school lunches to all students.
- New York State should expand the Empire State Child Credit (ESCC) to benefit families across the state.
- Increase the minimum wage in New York City and across state.
- The federal government should improve SNAP to make it more effective, accessible, and impactful.

Food insecurity is almost always reflective of acute economic deprivation. The fact that almost 30 percent of New York City residents go hungry or are forced to seek out free food should be a matter of urgent concern for all policymakers and elected officials. We hope this report will help further the conversation on improving food security for all New Yorkers.

## Introduction

For the past 20 years, the Unheard Third survey has polled New Yorkers on a variety of issues including hardships, employment, benefits reciprocity, housing and their opinions on policy issues. Food insecurity has been an area that the survey has explored every year since it was launched, thus generating a rich dataset of responses spanning two decades.

### Food insecurity questions in the Unheard Third Surveys

To gauge the extent of food insecurity, the Unheard Third Survey from 2002 to 2020 posed the following four questions to New Yorkers:

- Did you ever run short of money to buy food?
- Did you receive free food or meals from a food pantry or food bank or meal program?
- Did you receive free food or meals from family or friends because you didn't have enough money to buy food?
- Did you go hungry because there wasn't enough money to buy food?

Since 2021, we have combined the four questions into the following two questions:

- Did you receive free food or meals from a food pantry, soup kitchen, meal program, family, or friend because you didn't have enough money to buy food?
- Did you often skip meals or go hungry because there wasn't enough food to buy food?

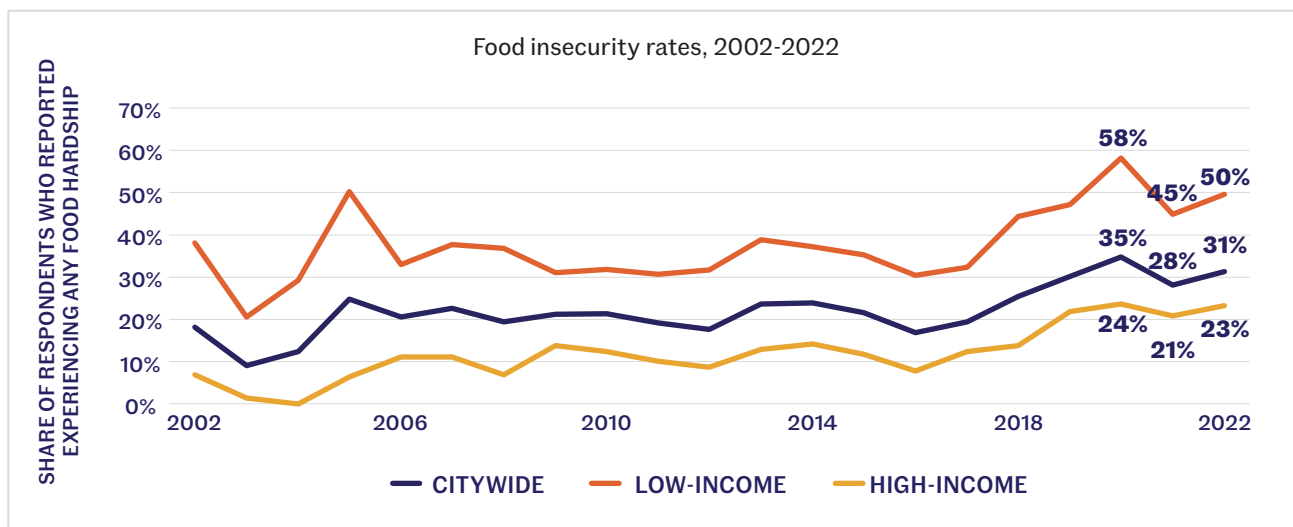
## Food Hardship is a persistent and pervasive challenge.

In our latest Unheard Third survey, conducted in summer of 2022, an estimated 31.3 percent of respondents, citywide, answered ‘yes’ to having experienced any food hardship (Figure 1). The share was higher among low-income respondents, almost 50 percent of whom reported experiencing food hardship. Looking back over the two decades, we see that food insecurity has been a persistent problem for a fifth of the population prior to COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, citywide rates of food hardship have been higher, **reaching an all-time high of 35 percent** in 2020. In 2021, the share of respondents reporting food hardship declined to 28 percent, likely due to availability of COVID-19 related government assistance and relief— and increased to 31 percent again in 2022 as the additional assistance expired. Rates of food hardship were higher among low-income New Yorkers—those with incomes below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL). Prior to the pandemic, the share of low-income respondents who reported experiencing food hardship was around 35 percent. The pandemic

pushed this rate to a staggering 58 percent in 2020. For New Yorkers who are better off, food insecurity is less of a challenge, but it still affects around 10 percent of moderate-to-higher income households.

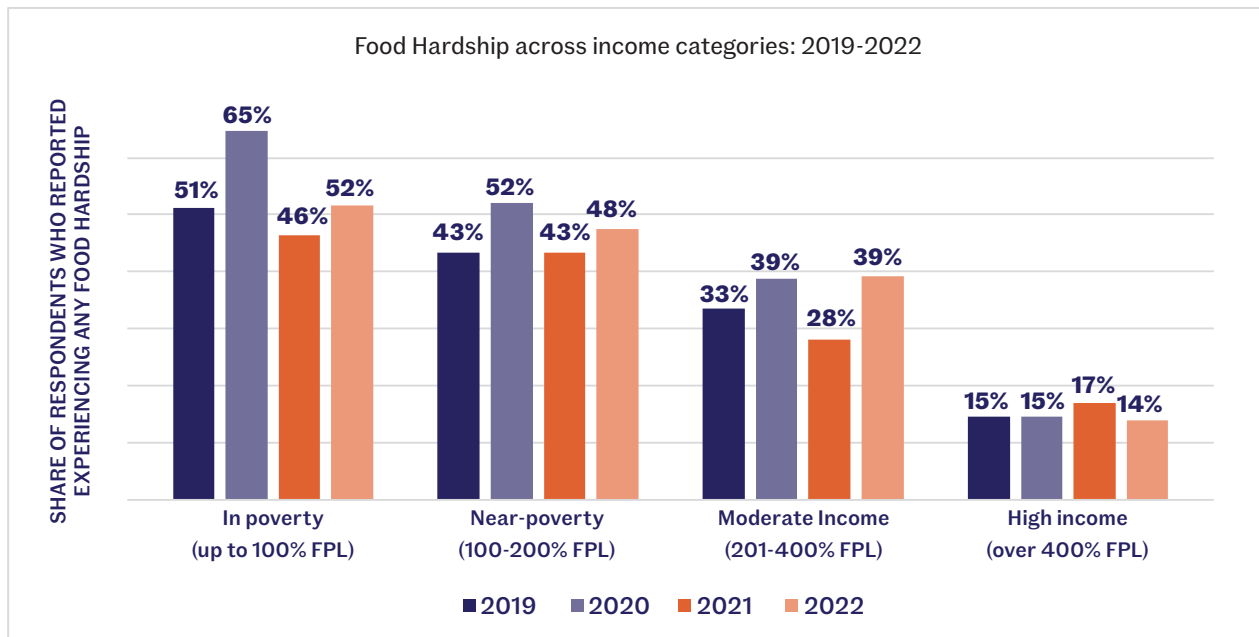
Figure 2 shows rates of food insecurity for the past four years for the various income categories. While there is not much difference in the rates of food hardship for the two low-income groups, there is considerable difference in the experience of food hardship between moderate income households (those with incomes between 200 and 400 percent of FPL) and high-income households (those with incomes above 400 percent of FPL). In fact, the rate of food hardship among moderate income earners is almost 40 percent in 2022—a full 26 percentage points higher than the rate among high income earners, only 14 percent of whom reported experiencing food hardship in 2022. For all income groups, the rate of food hardship followed the same pattern: increasing from 2019 to 2020, declining in 2021 as governmental assistance was made available, and rising again in 2022 as assistance ended and inflation reached historic highs.

**FIGURE 1. FOOD HARDSHIP IS A PERSISTENT CHALLENGE FOR NEW YORKERS**



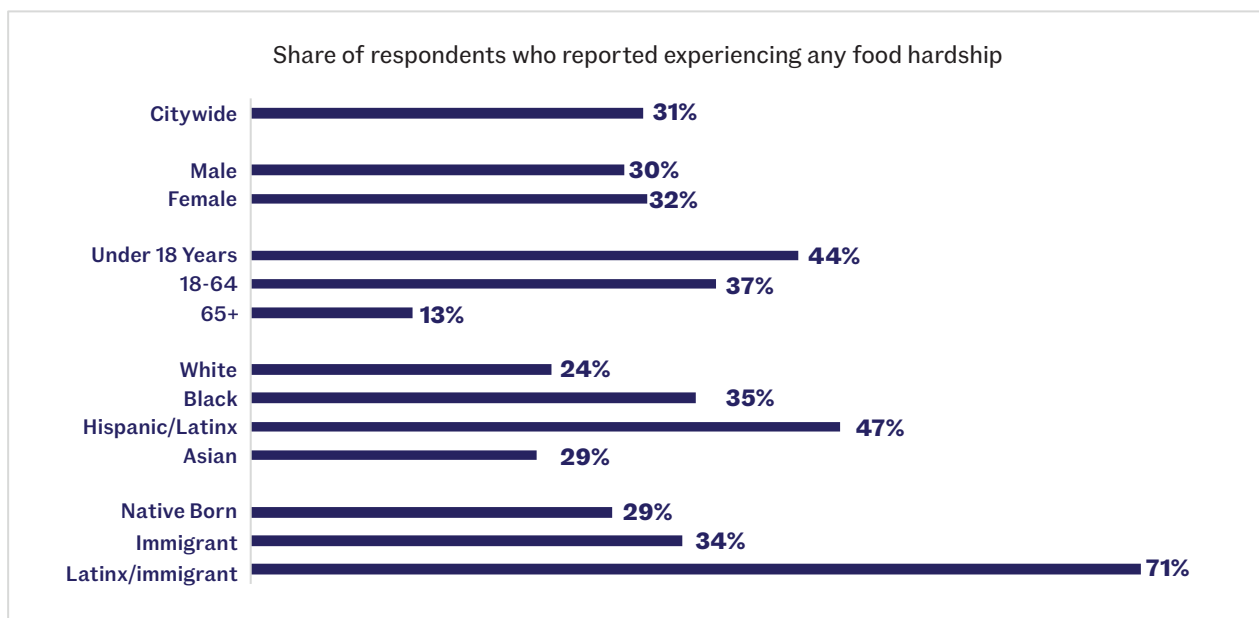
Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey, 2002-2022.

**FIGURE 2: FOOD INSECURITY IS A CHALLENGE FOR INDIVIDUALS ACROSS ALL INCOME GROUPS.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey, 2002-2022.

**FIGURE 3: FOOD INSECURITY IS AN ACUTE PROBLEM FOR WOMEN, IMMIGRANTS, AND HISPANIC/LATINX NEW YORKERS.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey, 2022.

Food insecurity is highest among immigrants, households with children, and Hispanic/Latinx households. As shown in Figure 3, women experienced slightly higher rates of food hardships—around 32 percent—compared to males, around 30 percent of whom reported experiencing food hardship in 2022.

At least 44 percent of households with children under 18 years of age experienced food

hardship. Such high rates of food hardship among households with children should be especially alarming since nutritional deficiencies at an early age can cause lifelong deficits in cognitive ability and health quality.

Hispanic/Latinx communities report higher than average rates of food hardship. Among immigrants who reported Latino ethnicity, food hardship rates are extra-ordinarily high at 71 percent.

### Low-income New Yorkers are more likely to experience ‘severe’ food hardship.

Based on the responses to the food insecurity questions asked in the survey, we choose to categorize households as experiencing moderate or severe food hardship. Households reporting ‘severe’ food hardship responded affirmatively to both seeking out free food from relatives, friends, charities etc., as well as skipping meals and enduring hunger, while moderate hardship is defined as experiencing only one of these challenges.

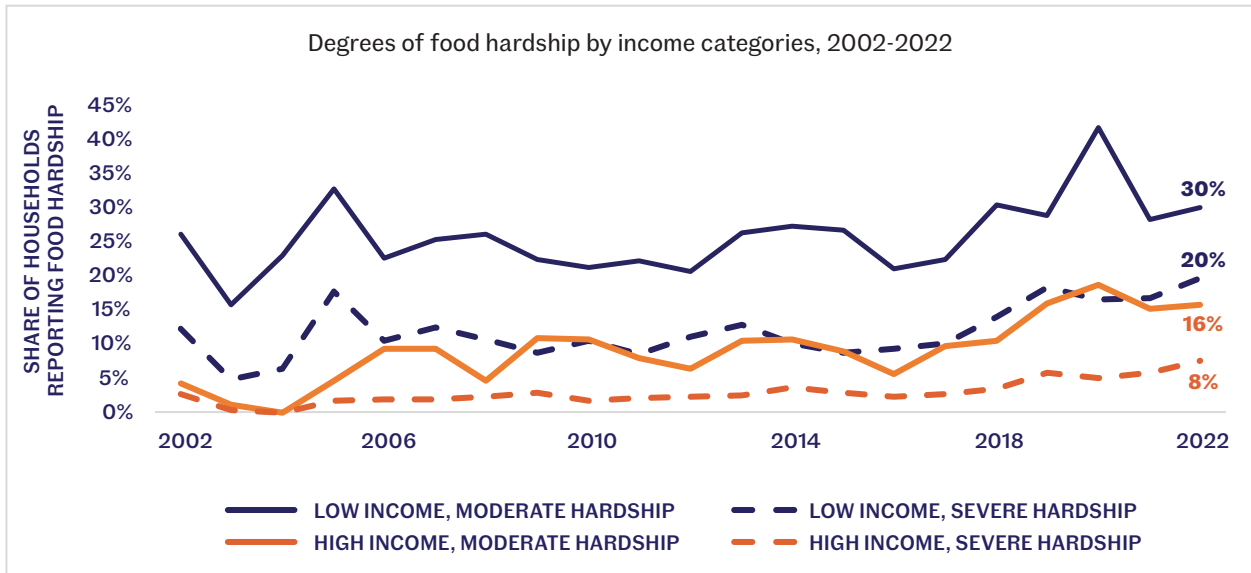
Figure 4 plots the degrees of food hardship as experienced by low and high-income households. Among low-income households reporting food hardship, around two-thirds experience ‘moderate’ food hardship and the remaining third experience ‘severe’ food hardship. Pre-pandemic, the share of low-income households experiencing severe food hardship was around 10 percent, but in 2022, almost 20 percent of low-income households reported experiencing severe food hardship. Even among higher income households, the share reporting that they experienced severe food hardship increased from a pre-pandemic average of 2.4 percent to 8 percent in 2022.

For each of the food insecurity questions listed above, most of the respondents replied either with a “Yes” or with a “No”, although a very small number of respondents either refused to respond or responded with a “Don’t Know”. Using these responses, we build a scale capturing the extent of food hardship faced by any household in the survey.

- **Any food hardship:** Households that respond positively to experiencing any or all food hardship. This is the broadest measure of food insecurity that can be constructed using our data.
- **Moderate food hardship:** Households that respond positively to experiencing one of the two food hardships in 2021 and 2022 or to two of the four food hardships before 2021 are described as experiencing ‘moderate’ food hardship.
- **Severe food hardship:** Households that respond positively to experiencing both of the two food hardships in 2021 and 2022 or to more than two of the four food hardships before 2021 are classified as experiencing ‘severe’ food hardship.

Households that do not respond ‘yes’ to any of the food hardship questions are classified as not experiencing any food hardship.

**FIGURE 4: WHILE MOST LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCE MODERATE LEVELS OF FOOD HARDSHIP, THEY ARE STILL MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SEVERE HARDSHIP THAN HIGHER INCOME HOUSEHOLDS.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third survey data.

### Acute food insecurity in Hispanic/Latinx communities

Food hardships are more prevalent among communities of color. Hispanic/Latinx and Black New Yorkers are more likely to experience food hardship compared to white and Asian counterparts.

As shown in Figure 5(a), in 2022, 59 percent of low-income Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers reported experiencing food hardship. The higher rate of food hardship continued even among higher income Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers, 37 percent of whom reported food hardship—a rate that is 14 percentage points higher than the average rate of food hardship among all moderate-to-high income New Yorkers.

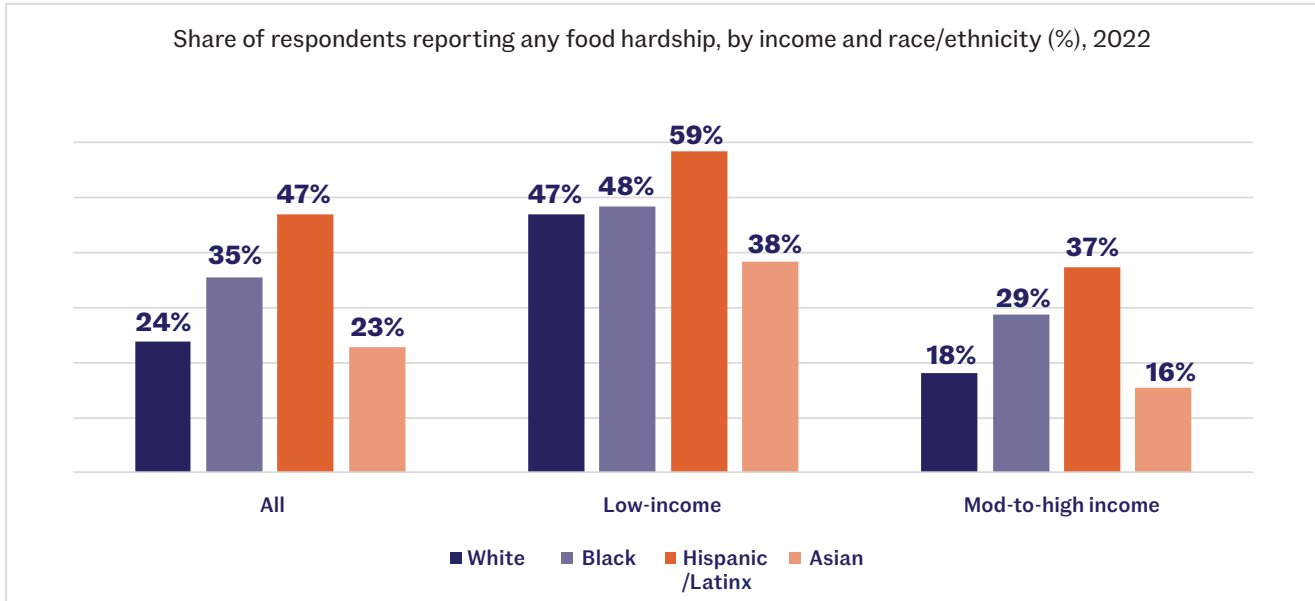
While the rates of food hardship among low-income Blacks and whites were similar, disparities emerged for the higher income households where Blacks had a higher rate of food hardship (29 percent) than whites (18 percent).

Comparing the extent of food hardship across races and ethnicities, we see that even prior to the pandemic (2019), around 30 percent of Black and Hispanic/Latinx low-income households experienced moderate food hardship and around 20 percent experienced severe food hardship (Figure 5 (b)). During the peak of the pandemic, in 2020, more than half of all low-income Hispanic/Latinx households reported moderate food hardship—an increase of 19 percentage points.

Low-income Asian households in the city were hit even harder as their rate of moderate hardship increased from 17 percent (in 2019) to 41 percent in 2020. The rates of hardship declined for all groups in 2021, but as pandemic related assistance ended, hardship rates worsened in the following year.

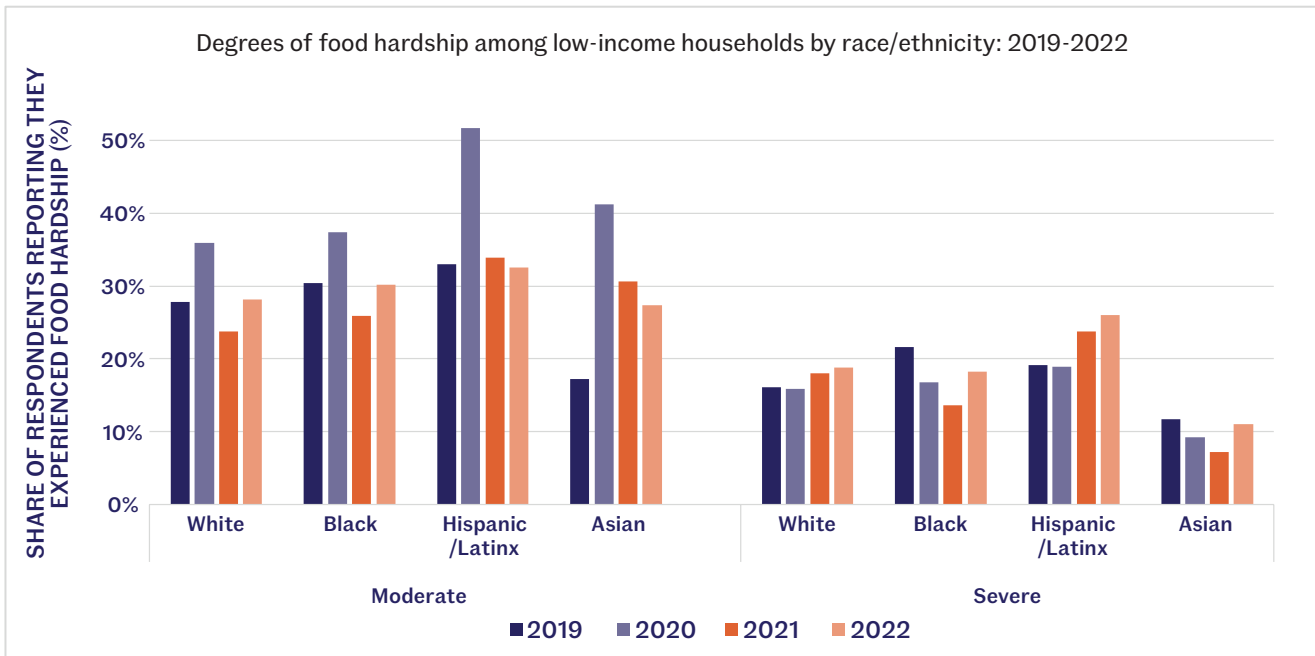
Among higher income Hispanic/Latinx households, 32 percent reported moderate food hardship—a significantly higher rate than all other groups.

**FIGURE 5(A): FOOD HARDSHIP IS A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS OF COLOR.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third survey.

**FIGURE 5(B): HISPANIC/LATINX HOUSEHOLDS ARE MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SEVERE FOOD HARDSHIP.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey data.

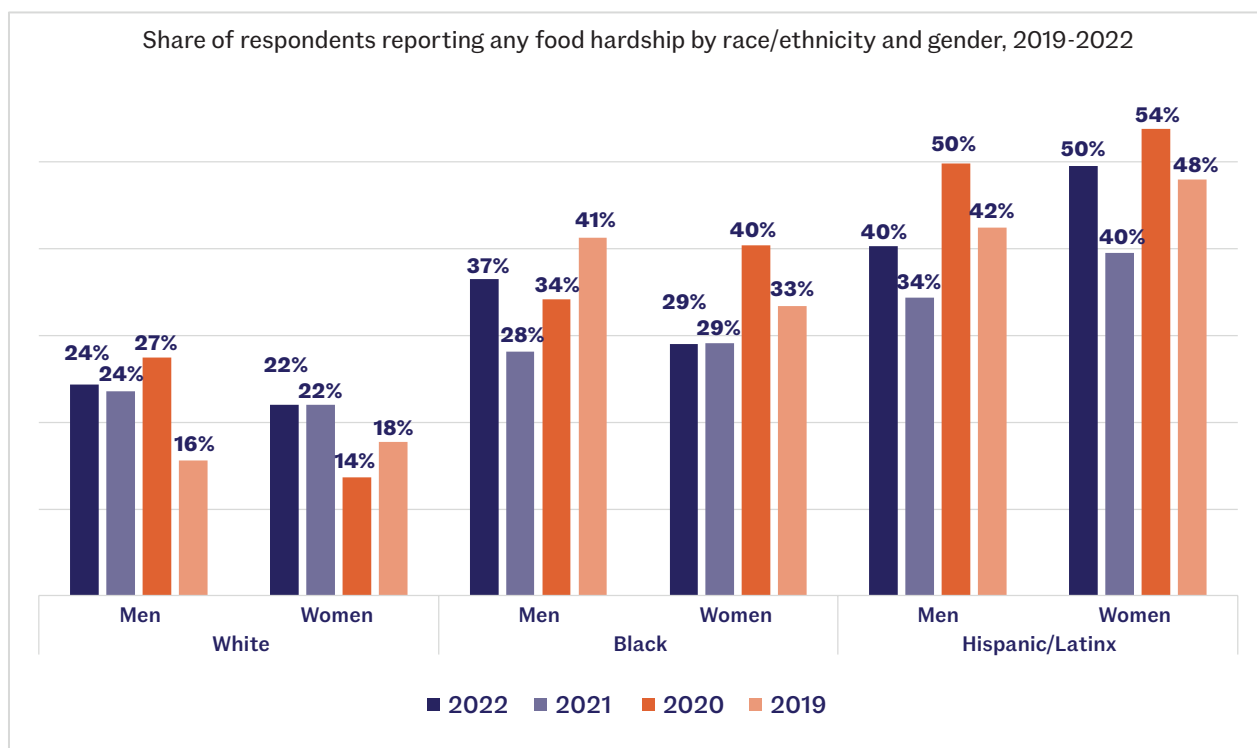


## Rates of food hardship are worse among women.

Food insecurity was disproportionately higher for Latina/x women compared to other groups in 2019 through 2022, as seen in Figure 6. In 2019, food insecurity was at highest for Latina/x women with 48 percent reporting they experienced one or more food hardships. They were followed by Black and Hispanic/Latinx men with food hardship rates of around 40 percent in 2019 and Black women, among whom 33 percent said that they experienced food hardship. In 2020, during the pandemic, food hardship rates shot up across the board reaching 54

percent for Hispanic/Latinx women, 50 percent for Hispanic/Latinx men and 40 percent for Black women. Testifying to the effectiveness of pandemic related assistance, we saw a big decline—an average of 10 percentage point reduction—in food hardship rates in 2021 for all groups. The rates of hardship were back up again in 2022, as assistance programs ended, especially for Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers. Rates of hardship among Black women stayed around their 2021 levels of 29 percent—lower than their pre-pandemic rates.

**FIGURE 6: FOOD INSECURITY LEVELS ESPECIALLY HIGH FOR HISPANIC/LATINX WOMEN.**



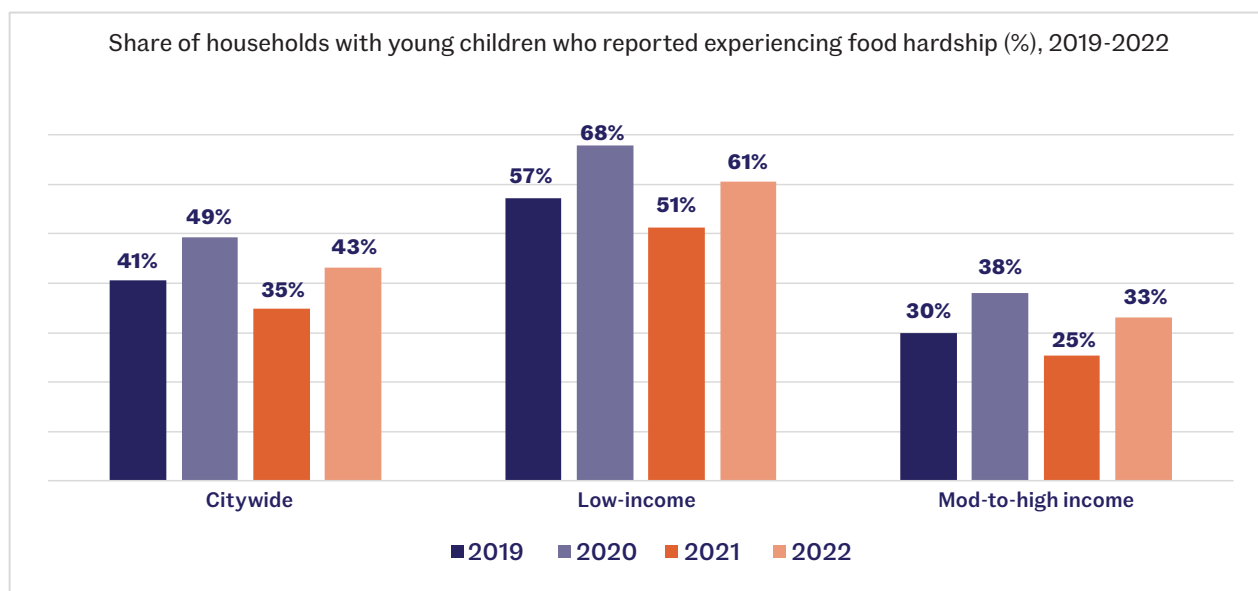
Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey data.

## Children bear the brunt of food hardship.

Perhaps the most profound adverse impact of food insecurity is felt by young children. Research shows that nutritional deficiencies experienced during the early years of a child's life cause irreparable harm to their long-term cognitive abilities, physical health, and overall well-being. Reduced cognitive ability typically translates to lower lifetime earnings. In other words, food hardship experience translates to incalculable disadvantages for children. Hunger Free America, a non-profit organization advocating for greater nutritional adequacy, notes that child hunger costs the nation \$28 billion annually as under-nourished children fail to perform well in school and require far more long-term spending on healthcare.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, Figures 7 (a) and 7 (b) show that an overwhelming majority of low-income households with children experience food insecurity. Over 60 percent of low-income families with young children endured food hardship in 2022. Even among moderate-to-high income households with children, one-in-three experienced food hardship. Looking back at the period from 2019 to 2022, food hardship rates among families with children exhibits the now familiar pattern over time: hardship rates, already high in 2019, increased drastically in 2020 during the pandemic, declined in 2021 as government assistance was available, only to increase back up in 2022.

**FIGURE 7 (A): 60 PERCENT OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN ENDURE FOOD HARDSHIP.**

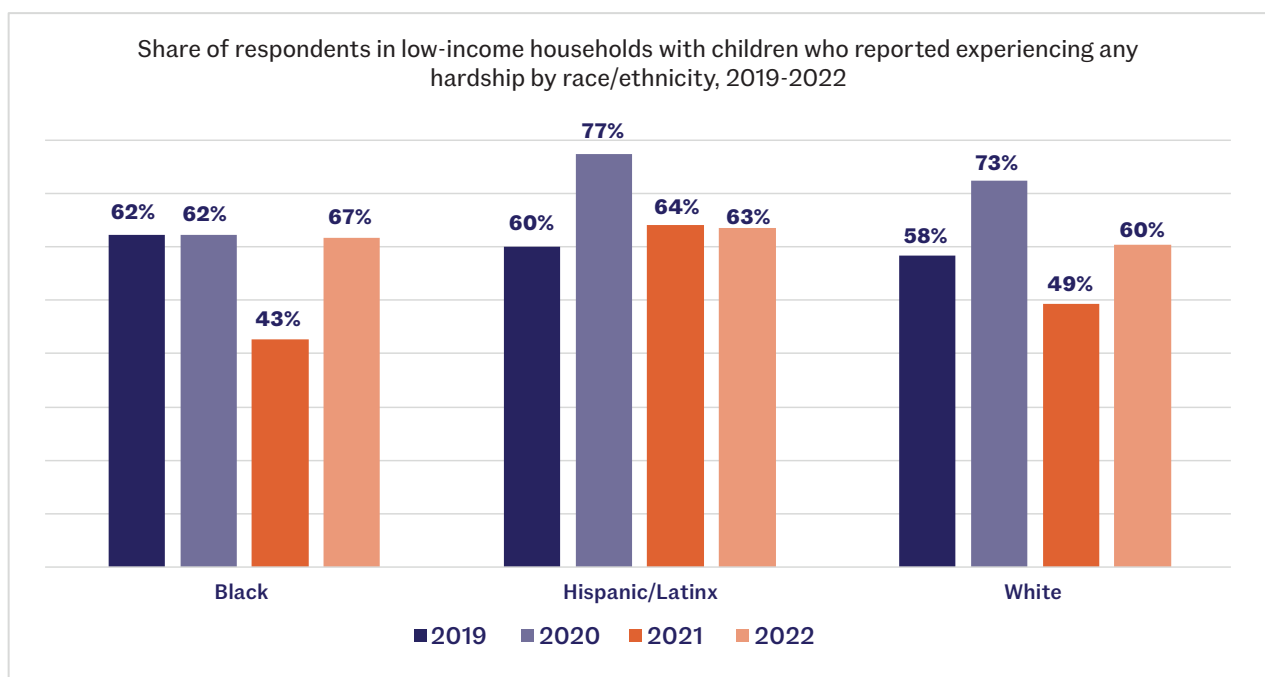


Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey data

Although there are stark differences in food hardship along racial lines, such differences are less palpable when we restrict ourselves to the city’s low-income households with young children. Figure 7(b) shows that pre-pandemic, Black and Hispanic/Latinx low-income households with young children experienced food hardship around 60 percent of the time—slightly worse than their white counterparts who experienced food hardship around 58 percent of the time. During the pandemic, food hardship among Hispanic/Latinx headed low-income households increased drastically with 77 percent reporting that they had to endure food

insecurity. Government assistance in the form of expanded SNAP benefits (P-EBT), stimulus checks and expanded Child Tax Credit helped to reduce food insecurity by around 20 percentage points among Black and white households, while reducing food insecurity in Hispanic/Latinx households by only 13 percentage points. The reduced impact observed among the Hispanic/Latinx community is probably due to the fact that most of these benefits required recipients to be citizens or legal immigrants and given the undocumented status for many of the city’s Hispanic/Latinx immigrants, their households remained excluded.

**FIGURE 7(B): FOOD INSECURITY RATES AMONG LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN ARE THE HIGHEST FOR THE CITY’S HISPANIC/LATINX HOUSEHOLDS.**

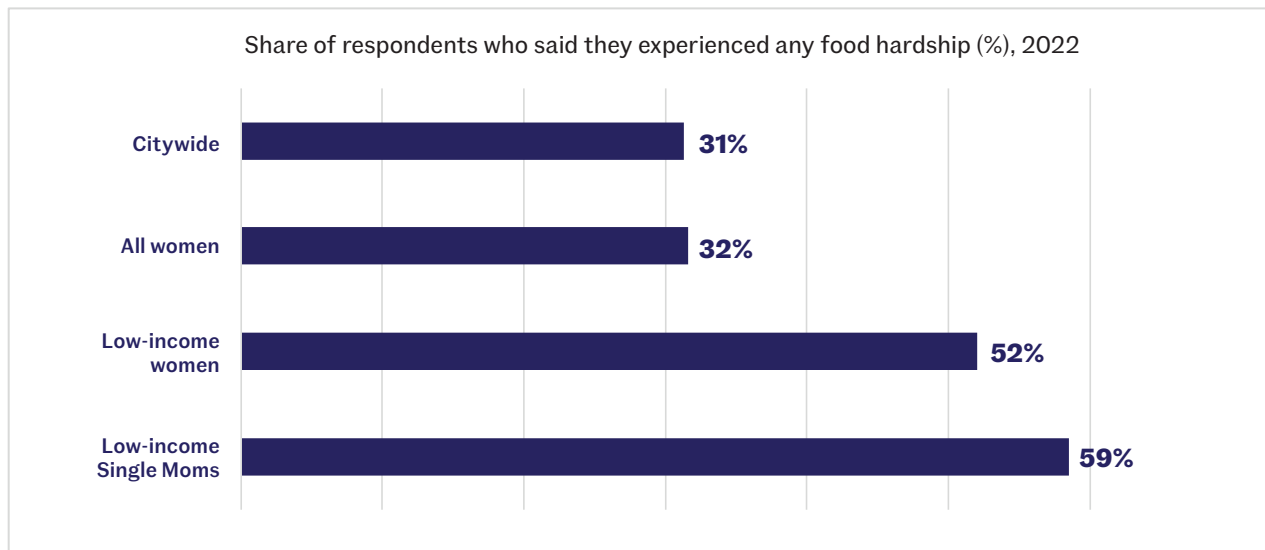


Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey data

Given that food hardship is worse for women, it is of no surprise that children in households headed by women endured alarmingly high levels of food insecurity. Figure 8 shows rates of food hardship among sub-groups of

women. More than half of low-income women experienced food insecurity in 2022 and among them, the rate of hardship for those who were single heads of households was even higher at 58 percent.

**FIGURE 8: LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS HEADED BY HISPANIC/LATINX WOMEN EXPERIENCED VERY HIGH LEVELS OF FOOD INSECURITY.**



Source: CSS analysis of Unheard Third Survey data.

## One-third of Bronx respondents reported food hardships in 2022.

Households in the Bronx were most likely to report higher rates of food hardships compared to other boroughs between 2019 and 2022. In 2019, nearly 40 percent of Bronx respondents reported that their household experienced food insecurity followed by Brooklyn (32 percent) and Manhattan (31 percent). Queens had the lowest rate of food insecurity where only 23 percent of respondents reported experiencing food insecurity.

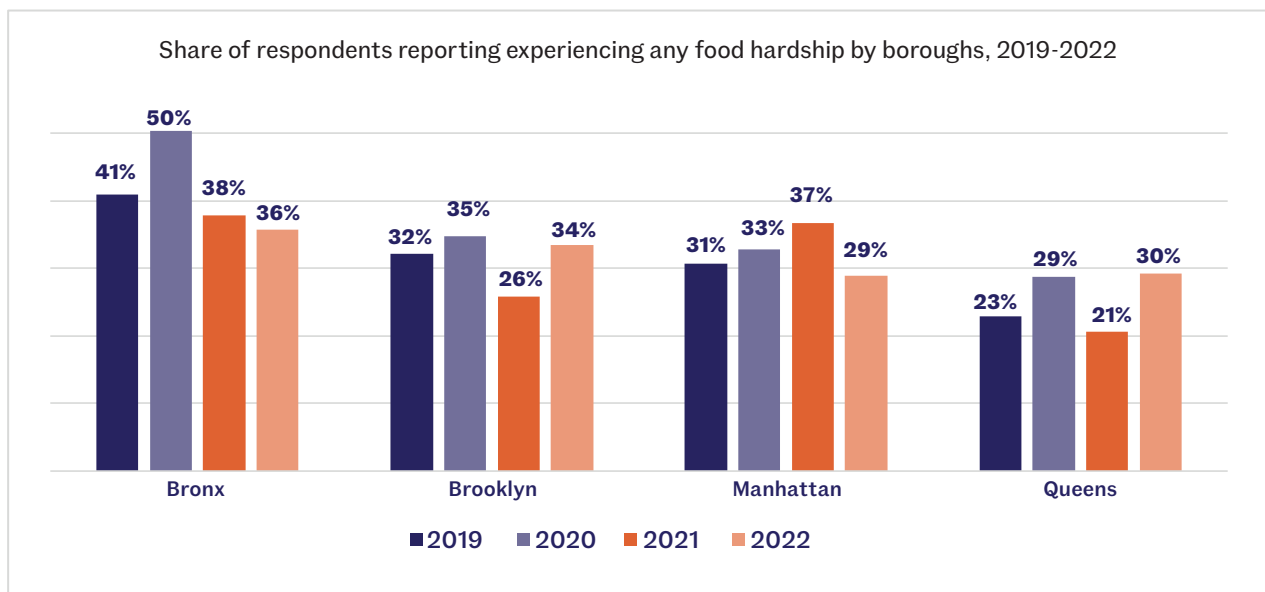
As shown in Figure 9, while food hardship rates increased across all the boroughs in 2020, households in the Bronx experienced the highest rate with over half of all respondents

from the Bronx reporting that they experienced food hardship.

In 2021, food hardship rates improved in all boroughs except Manhattan where 37 percent of households reported experiencing food hardship.

In 2022, the Bronx had the highest rate of food hardships at 36 percent, followed by Brooklyn at 34 percent and Manhattan at 29 percent. The borough of Queens has consistently had the lowest rates of food hardship among all the boroughs from 2019 to 2021. Currently, the food hardship rate in Queens is the same as that in Manhattan, around 29 percent.

**FIGURE 9: HOUSEHOLDS IN THE BRONX CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF FOOD INSECURITY.**



Source: CSS analysis of the Unheard Third Survey data.

## Recommendations

Addressing the pervasive levels of food insecurity requires a concerted effort from all levels of the government—state, city and federal. Below we list a few policy solutions to address food insecurity:

### City:

Based on the recommendations of The Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC) and CSS's own priorities, we list here the steps that the City can take to improve food security:<sup>4</sup>

- **Increase and baseline** the budget for the Human Resource Administration (HRA) to support community based organizations (CBOs) in benefits outreach and to streamline benefits applications.
  - Outreach efforts not only need to be targeted to areas of historically high food insecurity (e.g., neighborhoods of high poverty rate in south Bronx), but they also need to be expanded in Queens and Brooklyn, where the current food insecurity rates are worse than their pre-pandemic 2019 rates.
- **Increase and baseline** funding to adequately staff HRA's Department of Social Services (DSS)—the agency that processes SNAP applications—to ensure applicants receive their benefits with minimal delays.
  - Federal and state laws mandate that SNAP applications have to be processed within 30 days from when they are received. This is known as the “timeliness” window. Per the Mayor's Management Report, the timeliness rate was around 92 percent in City Fiscal Year (FY) 2021.<sup>5</sup> That rate decreased to 60 percent in FY 2022.<sup>6</sup> And in a recent hearing of the General Welfare Committee in March, the DSS Commissioner reported that current timeliness rate was around 36 percent.<sup>7</sup> Not only is this a violation of law, the cost of the suffering that these delays impose on a population that is struggling to meet basic needs is incalculable.
  - The City must address the staffing shortage and fill over 20,000 vacancies in HRA to ensure timely processing of SNAP applications.

- **Increase and baseline** funding to a total of \$59 Million for the Community Food Connection (CFC), formerly known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).<sup>8</sup>
- **Invest an additional \$200 million** in Capital funding for the continued redesign of middle and high school cafeterias to make them more modernized and culturally inclusive.<sup>9</sup>
  - Re-designing the school cafeterias so they have deli-style serving counters and more student friendly sitting have shown to have many positive benefits: increased participation in school lunches, healthier eating habits, improved test scores and attendance, and reduce health and achievement disparities across races.
  - The City’s Department of Education has completed the redesign of a third (65) of all school cafeterias. It needs to be fully funded to complete the redesign of the remaining school cafeterias, numbering over 500. At a one-time cost of \$500,000 per cafeteria, the City would need to spend \$200 million, to reap immense long-term benefits by making its young residents healthier and more engaged in school.
- **Invest \$37 million** so that all schools can have sustained, flexible food and nutrition education funding.
- **Increase compensation** and head count at the DOE’s Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) by \$3.5 million.

**State:**

- New York State should follow New York City and **provide free school lunches to all students**. It is encouraging to see that both the Assembly and the Senate one-house budgets have included funding—\$280 million—for Universal School Meals.
  - Research shows that after the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act went into effect in 2010, the nutritional quality of school meals has greatly improved.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of Universal School Meals, the state is depriving over 726,000 students who might benefit from accessing this high quality, nutritious food.
  - Since school meals are based on Federal Poverty Levels which are glaringly out of sync with New York’s high cost of living,<sup>11</sup> it is no surprise that children from a family of four making just \$51,400 would lose eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals and yet continue to experience hunger.
  - Perhaps the most important motivation to have Universal School Meals is to lift the stigma associated with accessing subsidized meals and free parents and school staff of the administrative burden of processing applications.

- **Expand the Empire State Child Credit (ESCC)** to benefit families across the state.

- The ESCC is a refundable tax credit available to income-eligible families with children aged 4 to 16 years. It is not available for young children (aged less than 4 years) and to lowest income families who might not have enough earnings to qualify.
- Advocates, including CSS, have been pushing the state to reform the credit make it as effective as possible in alleviating poverty and hardship.<sup>12</sup> These include- (1) expanding the credit to the state's youngest children (0-3 years old), restructuring the credit so that lowest-income families get the highest credit by removing the minimum income requirement and the phase-in, (3) expanding the maximum credit amount to \$1500 and including a \$500 minimum credit per child, (4) eliminating the cap on the number of children eligible to receive the credit, (5) including all families regardless of citizenship status, and (6) paying out the credit monthly or quarterly to smooth out income and help families keep up with the bills.<sup>13,14</sup>
- Given the immediate, irrefutable success of the expanded federal Child Tax Credit in cutting child poverty by half in 2021 and lifting an estimated 3 million children out of poverty,<sup>15</sup> New York's lawmakers should make it a priority to improve the ESCC. Both the Senate and the Assembly one-house budgets include provisions to expand the credit to 0-4 years old and the latter sets aside \$225 million to fund the expansion.<sup>16</sup> The Assembly budget also includes a recommendation to extend the supplemental ESCC for one year.<sup>17</sup>

- **Increase the minimum wage** in New York City and across state.

While the New York City minimum wage was raised to \$15 in 2018, the recent years of high inflation have eroded much of the benefits that a higher minimum wage was expected to bring to low-income households.

- The Governor's office and the state Assembly have proposed raising the statewide minimum wage to \$15 per hour and indexing it to cost of living increases up to 3 percent every year.<sup>18</sup> While this would surely be an improvement on the status quo, legislators in NY have a chance of enacting a better proposal and raising the wage floor up to \$21.25 by 2026 while linking annual increases to an index of productivity improvements in following years.<sup>19</sup>
- Given that women and people of color are over-represented in under-paid jobs, this measure would go a long way in reducing the high rates of food insecurity seen among low-income women and among low-income Black and Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers.<sup>20</sup>



- **Increase the cash assistance allowance**

amounts to address food insecurity, directly and efficiently.

- Cash assistance, also known as public assistance, is a lifeline for over half a million New Yorkers.<sup>21,22</sup> But public assistance grant amounts have stayed frozen in time for over 20 to 30 years. A family of four is allowed a mere \$500 per month in assistance. The program is aimed at individuals with very limited incomes, and it might also require that recipients be engaged in work (technically described as “Maintenance-of-Effort” requirement).<sup>23</sup>
- Grant amounts—both shelter and non-shelter portions—as well as Standard Of Need amounts have not been updated to reflect either the high cost of living in New York or the historically high inflation since early 2022.<sup>24</sup> New York state legislature can address this critical issue by revising the cash assistance grant amounts to reflect current prices.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Federal:**

- **Improve SNAP** to make it more effective, accessible, and impactful.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has been a powerful tool in fighting hunger and poverty.

- In New York state, 1-in-7 residents, or 2.9 million New Yorkers rely on SNAP. A report by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that between 2014 and 2018, SNAP lifted over half a million New Yorkers out of poverty every year, including 218,000 children.
- The SNAP benefit amounts need to be increased to reflect the continued high cost of food. While the USDA does update the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan to reflect increased costs, the assistance amounts are still too low. Average SNAP benefit in fiscal year 2023 is set at \$6.43 per person per day.<sup>26</sup>
- Eligibility should be expanded to undocumented immigrants. As shown in Figure 2, one-in-three immigrants and over 70 percent of Hispanic/Latinx immigrants endure food insecurity.
- Republicans in Congress are trying to tie SNAP access to onerous work requirements,<sup>27</sup> a proposal that would throw an estimated 736,000 New Yorkers off SNAP.<sup>28</sup> Recipients of SNAP aged 18 to 49 years and who are “able-bodied and without dependents” already need to work at least 20 hours a week or enroll in a work training program to receive aid. The latest Republican proposal would extend this provision to cover those aged up to 65 years. There is a rich trove of empirical evidence and research showing that onerous work requirements do not help the recipients find economic security, rather they worsen poverty and increase administrative burden.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that food insecurity continues to be a serious problem across New York City. Federal policies, like the 2021 American Rescue Plan expanded the Child Tax Credit to eligible families during the pandemic. These and other measures, including the stimulus checks, the expanded unemployment insurance, the expanded SNAP benefits, and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) helped reduce food insecurity and drastically reduced child poverty. Throughout this report we saw that food insecurity rates in 2021 were significantly lower than their pandemic peaks and often lower than their pre-pandemic levels. We also noted that food insecurity levels had increased in 2022, in tandem with the expiration of many or most of these programs.

Perhaps the last of the pandemic era assistance program to expire is the SNAP Emergency Allotments (EA), which ended in February 2023, plunging hundreds and thousands of households into worsening food insecurity in New York City and millions of households across the country. A study estimated that the EAs kept 4.2 million people out of poverty in the last quarter of 2021, reducing poverty by 10 percent and child poverty by 14 percent on average, and by 18 percent among Black, non-Hispanic/Latinx children.<sup>30</sup>

In a city where approximately one-in-four children live in poverty, and almost 43 percent endure food insecurity, the expiration of SNAP EAs is a major blow to an estimated 2.9 million New Yorkers, many of them young children. Our survey shows that

even among regular recipients of SNAP benefits, the rates of food hardship are very high: in 2022, 57 percent of all respondents who received SNAP reported experiencing food hardship. These households are losing \$95 per month or more.

As inflation continues unabated—the USDA estimates food prices will increase 7.9 percent in 2023 and they were already 8.4 percent higher in March than this time last year<sup>31</sup>—the city’s low-income households are running out of options. They are being forced to choose between putting food on the table and between filling prescriptions or paying rents.<sup>32</sup> The challenge is harder for the city’s Hispanic/Latinx community where food insecurity rates are alarmingly high.

It is imperative that policymakers and elected officials take note of the crisis levels of food insecurity plaguing almost one-in-three New Yorkers. Nutritional inadequacy handicaps children’s physical and mental capabilities; it also harms adults by making them less productive and more prone to illnesses. Increased spending on nutritional programs like SNAP not only alleviate suffering but they also increase GDP (a \$1 billion increase in SNAP is estimated to increase GDP by \$1.5 billion), create more jobs and reduce healthcare spending.<sup>33</sup>

Even as federal lawmakers undermine their support for nutritional assistance, New York should rise up to the challenge to feed its own residents. It should develop a program that is less encumbered by paternalistic and work requirement constraints on recipients than SNAP.

In a city that claims to never sleep, many go to sleep hungry. That needs to change.

## About the Unheard Third Survey

The Community Service Society designed this survey in collaboration with Lake Research Partners, who administered the survey by phone using professional interviewers. The survey was conducted from July 12 through August 18, 2022.

The survey reached a total of **1,968 New York City residents**, age 18 or older, divided into two samples:

- **1,234 low-income** residents (up to 200% of federal poverty standards, or FPL) comprise the first sample:
  - **628 poor** respondents, from HH earning **at or below 100% FPL** (68.8% conducted by cell phone)
  - **606 near-poor** respondents, from HH earning **101% - 200% FPL** (69.6% conducted by cell phone)
- **734 moderate- and higher-income** residents (above 200% FPL) comprise the second sample:
  - **509 moderate-income** respondents, from HH earning **201% - 400% FPL** (78.2% conducted by cell phone)
  - **225 higher-income** respondents, from HH earning **above 400% FPL** (68.5% conducted by cell phone)

Landline telephone numbers for the low-income sample were drawn using random digit dial (RDD) among exchanges in census tracts with an average annual income of no more than \$46,630. Telephone numbers for the higher income sample were drawn using RDD in exchanges in the remaining census tracts. The data were weighted slightly by income level, gender, educational attainment, region, age, immigrant status, and race in order to ensure that it accurately reflects the demographic configuration of these populations. Interviews were conducted in English (1,821), Spanish (101), and Chinese (46). The low-income sample was weighted down into the total to make an effective sample of 500 New Yorkers.

In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends on both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question. The margin of error for the entire survey is +/- 2.2%, for the low-income component is +/- 2.8%, and for the higher income component is +/- 3.6%, all at the 95% confidence interval.

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