



MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

Spotlight on

FOOD BUDGET

SHORTFALLS IN NEW YORK CITY



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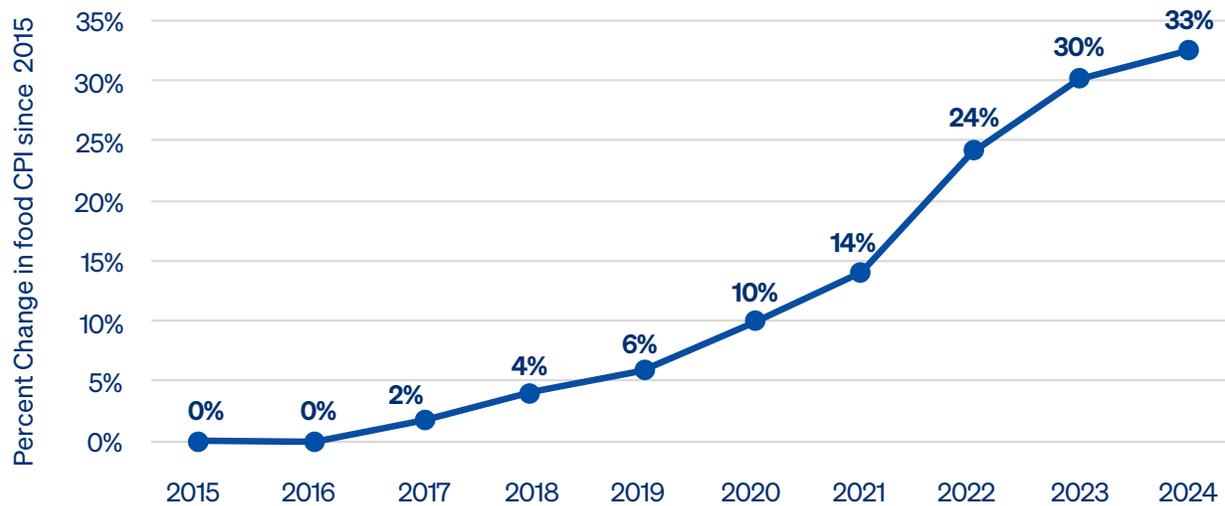
INTRODUCTION

Each year prior to the Thanksgiving holiday, a time when access to healthy and nutritious food may be taken for granted by many, Robin Hood and researchers at Columbia University's School of Social Work publish a spotlight report on food hardship and assistance. The report draws on the latest data from the Poverty Tracker, a longitudinal study of poverty and well-being in New York City, and presents the latest estimates of the prevalence of food hardship and pantry use in the city followed by an analysis of food-related challenges facing New Yorkers. Over the years, our research has shown that stable access to affordable, healthy, and nutritious food remains out of reach for many families in the city, and our latest findings on food hardship confirm that this continues to be true. Further, while food pantries and government programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can reduce barriers to meeting food needs, rising prices in recent years, as well as looming cuts at the federal level, are likely to exacerbate food hardship in the near future. While the impending cuts to SNAP and other programs are not yet reflected in the Poverty Tracker data, our new analysis focuses on the role that rising food prices have played in stretching New Yorkers' food budgets increasingly thin in recent years.

Rising prices have plunged New York City, and the country at large, into what many have called an affordability crisis. With the price of food in the New York City metro area rising by 33% over the last ten years (Figure 1), it is critical to understand how New Yorkers' ability to afford food has been impacted. In this report, we look at the share of New Yorkers who report having a food budget shortfall — or needing more money to meet their family's food needs — and how the prevalence of these shortfalls has changed between the period prior to the pandemic and in the years since. We also show how the amount of money needed by families to meet their food needs has changed in recent years, and examine how food budget shortfalls vary across different demographic and socioeconomic groups. In so doing, we provide a more tangible picture of the extent to which families are struggling to meet their food needs throughout the city, and how these struggles have become more common alongside the sharp rise in food prices. Throughout this spotlight, we also feature stories and quotes from qualitative interviews with New Yorkers, highlighting how keeping food on the table has long been a challenge for many that is only intensifying with rising prices.

Figure 1

Percent change in the Consumer Price Index for food in the New York-Newark-Jersey City metro area, all urban consumers (2015 to 2024)



Source: Historical data for the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: Food in New York-Newark-Jersey City accessed via the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.



KEY FINDINGS



In 2024, **6% of New Yorkers experienced severe food hardship**, translating to nearly **550,000** people often running out of food or worrying that food will run out before having money to buy more.

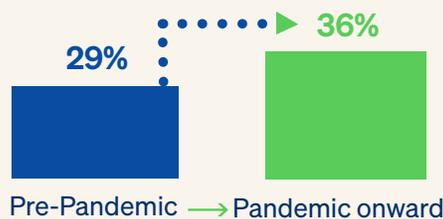


14% of New Yorkers reported using a food pantry in 2024, translating to nearly **1.2 million** people accessing this form of food assistance.

Prior to the pandemic, more than 1 in 4 adults in New York City reported needing more money to meet their food needs. This share has since increased to more than 1 in 3 (29% vs. 36%), representing nearly 440,000 additional adults facing food budget shortfalls in recent years.



ADULTS FACING FOOD BUDGET SHORTFALLS



= 440,000

additional adults facing food budget shortfalls in recent years



In the latest data, more than **40%** of families with children reported needing more money to meet their food needs — a substantially higher share than the citywide average (36%) and a notable increase since the years before the pandemic (34%).



Food prices are affecting New Yorkers across the income distribution, with rates of food budget shortfall increasing in recent years regardless of income.

The vast majority (nearly 90%) of families with children reporting a food budget shortfall have at least **one working-age adult who worked in the past year, yet still find that their earnings cannot keep pace with food costs.**

Communities of **color, immigrants, and female New Yorkers** face higher rates of food budget shortfall compared to their counterparts.



More than **40% of Black, Latino, and foreign-born New Yorkers and food assistance recipients** experienced food budget shortfalls in recent years.

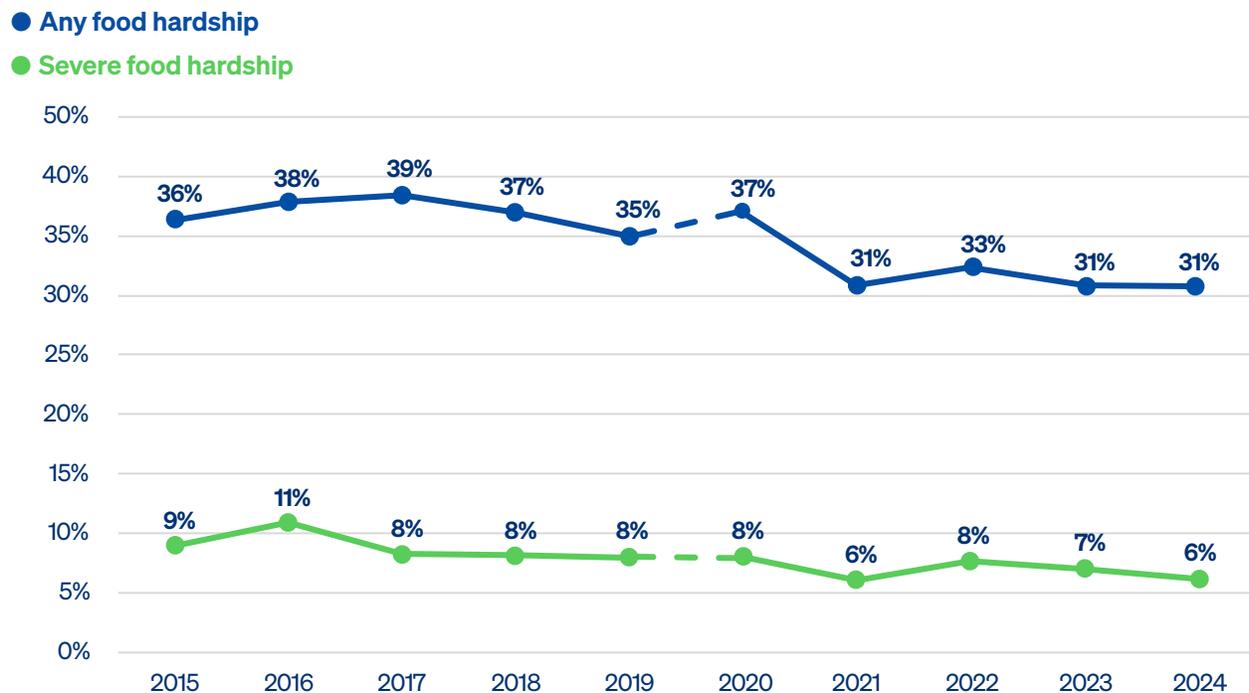
Food hardship and food pantry use in New York City

Before examining the food budget shortfalls in the city, we first provide an update on the state of food hardship and food pantry use in 2024, our most recent year of survey data. Both outcomes are important indicators for understanding the extent to which New Yorkers are experiencing food hardship, as well as the services they may be using to meet their needs.

In 2024, 6% of New Yorkers experienced severe food hardship.¹ This translates to nearly 550,000 New Yorkers often running out of food or worrying that food will run out before having money to buy more (Figure 2). Figure 2 also shows the corresponding rates of any food hardship, defined as sometimes or often running out of food or worrying that food will run out before having money to buy more. About 1 in 3 New Yorkers reported at least some food hardship, translating to more than 2.6 million people facing some form of food hardship.

Figure 2

Overall rates of food hardship in New York City by year (2015-2024)



Source: Single year estimates are derived from Poverty Tracker annual survey data, 2015-2024. In 2020, the Poverty Tracker sampling design changed to include an oversample of New Yorkers of Chinese descent, including those who speak Mandarin or are able to complete surveys in simplified or traditional Chinese. Thus, pre-2020 results are not directly comparable to results from 2020 to the present, which we signify with a dashed line break in the New York City trend line.

¹ The Poverty Tracker uses the American Community Survey (ACS) to produce weights which aim to make the study's sample representative of the New York City adult population. The data from the 2024 ACS needed to produce these weights were not publicly available at the time of this publication, and we therefore use an alternative method to produce preliminary estimates of food hardship and food pantry use for 2024. The method requires that we estimate the change in food hardship and food pantry use between 2023 and 2024 using a regression model that controls for all of the variables used in the poststratification model for weighting. We then apply the estimated change in food hardship and food pantry use between 2023 and 2024 from our regression model to our weighted 2023 estimates to produce the preliminary rates for 2024.

Food hardship and stigma

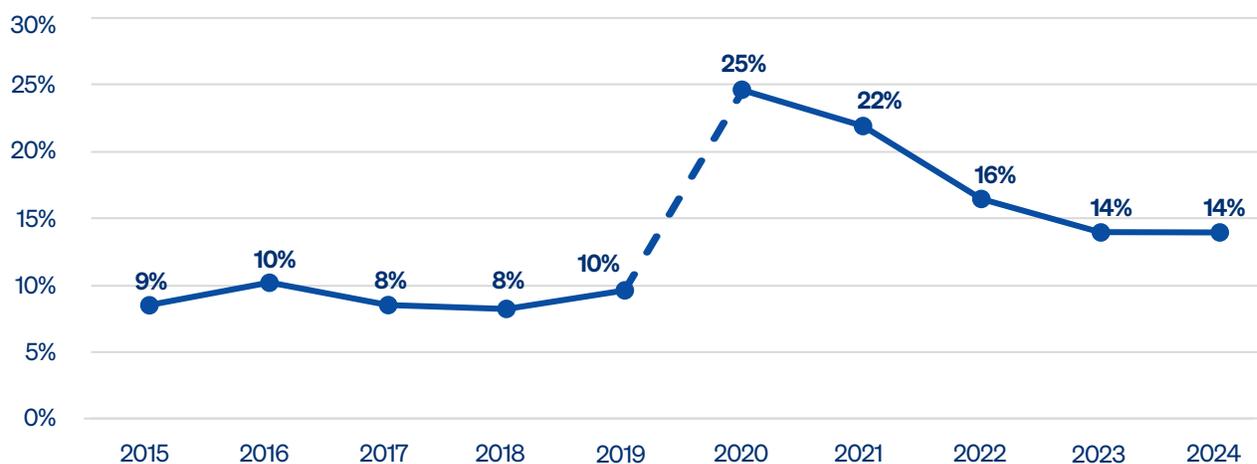
Feeding a family in New York City has long required resourcefulness, sacrifice, and imagination. For many parents, food hardship is not a temporary experience but a chronic condition. Letticia, raising a teenage son, described how even simple requests can strain her budget: **“I had to tell John I don’t have money to give you to go to school and buy lunch. Make a sandwich. There’s a croissant there. You put butter and cheese, which is what we have.”** He went without eating that day, choosing hunger over the stigma of not having enough money for a school lunch.

When it comes to accessing food assistance, 14% of New Yorkers reported using a food pantry in 2024 (Figure 3). This translates to nearly 1.2 million New Yorkers using a food pantry in 2024. Food pantry usage spiked during the peak of the pandemic, and has remained elevated in the years since. As our past research has shown, a wider and more diverse set of New Yorkers have been relying on the pantry system in recent years compared to the years prior to the pandemic.²

As we will see in the following sections, many New Yorkers turning to food pantries are increasingly likely to find their resources stretched thin and unable to keep up with the rising cost of food in the city.

Figure 3

Overall rates of pantry use in New York City by year (2015-2024)



Source: Single year estimates are derived from Poverty Tracker annual survey data, 2015-2024. In 2020, the Poverty Tracker sampling design changed to include an oversample of New Yorkers of Chinese descent, including those who speak Mandarin or are able to complete surveys in simplified or traditional Chinese. Thus, pre-2020 results are not directly comparable to results from 2020 to the present, which we signify with a dashed line break in the New York City trend line.

² Wimer et al., “Spotlight on food assistance from New York City’s pantry system.”

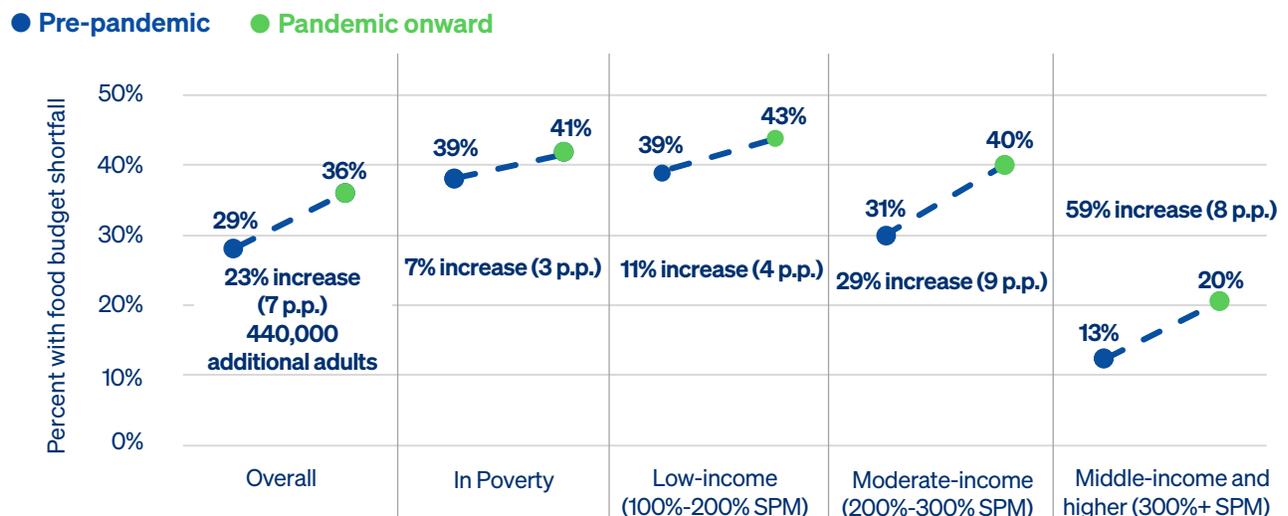
Food budget shortfalls in New York City

To better understand New Yorkers' food needs, the Poverty Tracker asks respondents: "In order to buy just enough food to meet your household's needs, would you need to spend more, less, or about the same as you spend now?"³ New Yorkers who report needing more money to afford enough food for their family are identified as having a 'food budget shortfall.' An analysis of these data reveals that it has always been difficult for New Yorkers to afford food, and this has only intensified in the years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid increase in food prices. **Prior to the pandemic, more than 1 in 4 adult New Yorkers reported needing more money to meet their food needs, but this share has since risen to more than 1 in 3 (29% to 36%, Figure 4).** This represents nearly 440,000 additional adult New Yorkers experiencing food budget shortfalls in recent years.

Examining these differences by income also reveals how individuals above the poverty line — and even well above it — increasingly need more money to meet their food needs, with rates of food budget shortfall increasing across the income distribution. (See text box for additional information on how poverty and income are measured in this spotlight.) The share of adults reporting a food budget shortfall increased to 41% for those in poverty since the onset of the pandemic, and to 43% for New Yorkers living between 100% and 200% of the poverty line. Among New Yorkers with incomes above 200% of the poverty line, the share experiencing a food budget shortfall increased from 31% to 40% for those between 200% and 300%, and from 13% to 20% for those above 300%. **The sharp increase in food budget shortfalls among New Yorkers above 200% of the poverty line points to the widespread impact of food costs, regardless of income.**

Figure 4

Percent of adult New Yorkers with food budget shortfalls by income, pre-pandemic and pandemic onward



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2016, 2017, and 2023. Data from 2016 and 2017 are considered pre-pandemic, and data from 2023 are considered pandemic onward. Calculated percent and percentage point changes may not align exactly with results in figure due to rounding.

Note: In 2024, the SPM poverty threshold was \$50,283 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, 200% of the threshold for the same family was \$100,565, and 300% of the threshold was \$150,848. P.p. stands for percentage point.

³ This question was asked of respondents in the second cohort in 2016, the second and third cohort in 2017, and the fourth and fifth cohort in 2023.

How are poverty and income measured in this spotlight?

In this spotlight, poverty is measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which the Census Bureau began producing in 2010. Among other changes, the SPM improves upon the Official Poverty Measure by accounting for geographic variation in costs of living, as well as the role of government taxes and transfers in determining poverty. We use the SPM to categorize New Yorkers into four separate groups that indicate how far they are living from the poverty threshold for their family size:

- (1) below 100% of the SPM threshold;
- (2) between 100% and 200% of the SPM threshold;
- (3) between 200% and 300% of the SPM threshold; and
- (4) above 300% of the SPM threshold.

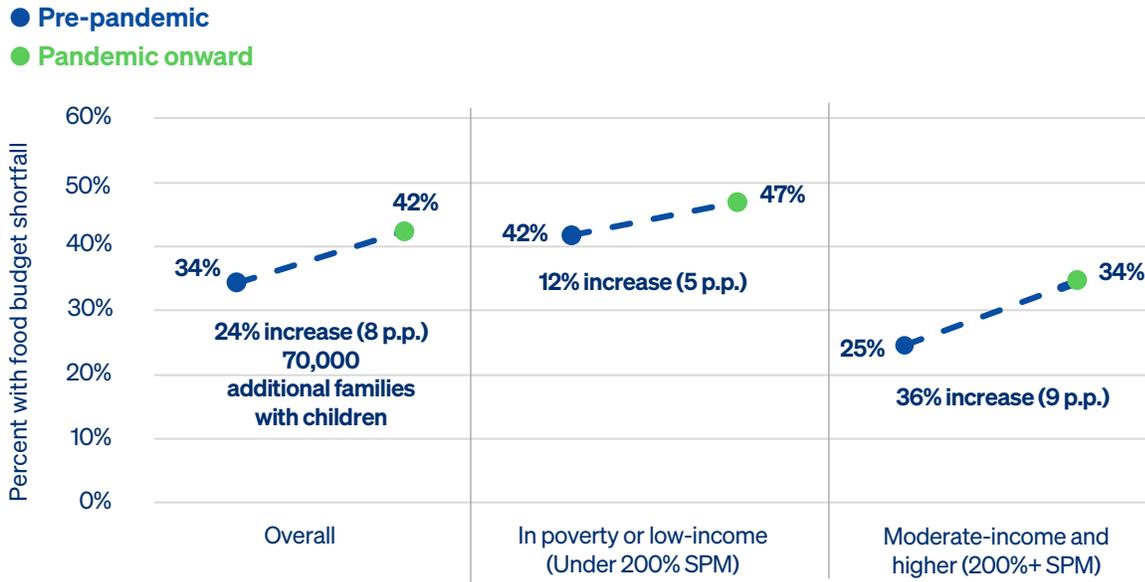
In the research literature, these groups are often referred to as “in poverty,” “low income,” “moderate income,” and “middle-income or higher,” respectively. In 2024, the latest year for which we can construct these thresholds, the SPM poverty threshold was \$50,283 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City; 200% of the threshold for the same family was \$100,565; and 300% was \$150,848.

Examining food budget shortfall rates for New York City families with children reveals a similar, though more severe, picture of increased difficulty affording food (Figure 5). **In recent years, 42% of families with children reported needing more money to meet their household food needs — a 24% increase (or 8 percentage point increase) from the pre-pandemic period (34%).** This represents more than 70,000 additional families with children experiencing food budget shortfalls in recent years. Figure 5 also shows that the share of families with a food budget shortfall is increasing because both those below and above the poverty line are increasingly struggling to meet their food needs. In fact, food budget shortfalls for families with children living below 200% of the poverty line (i.e., in poverty or low income) increased by five percentage points to 47% since the onset of the pandemic.⁴ For families with children living above 200% of the poverty line, we also see a notable increase in the share reporting a food budget shortfall — increasing from 25% to 34% in recent years. Similar to the trends presented in Figure 4, the increase in food budget shortfalls for families with children across the income distribution again points to the widespread impact of rising food prices. Additionally, regardless of income, families with children are more likely to experience food budget shortfall than the citywide population.

⁴ In Figure 5, we cannot present as detailed income groups for families with children as we do for all adults (as presented in Figure 4) because of sample size constraints.

Figure 5

Percent of families with children with food budget shortfalls by income, pre-pandemic and pandemic onward



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2016, 2017, and 2023. Data from 2016 and 2017 are considered pre-pandemic, and data from 2023 are considered pandemic onward.

Note: In 2024, the SPM poverty threshold was \$50,283 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, 200% of the threshold for the same family was \$100,565, and 300% of the threshold was \$150,848. P.p. stands for percentage point.

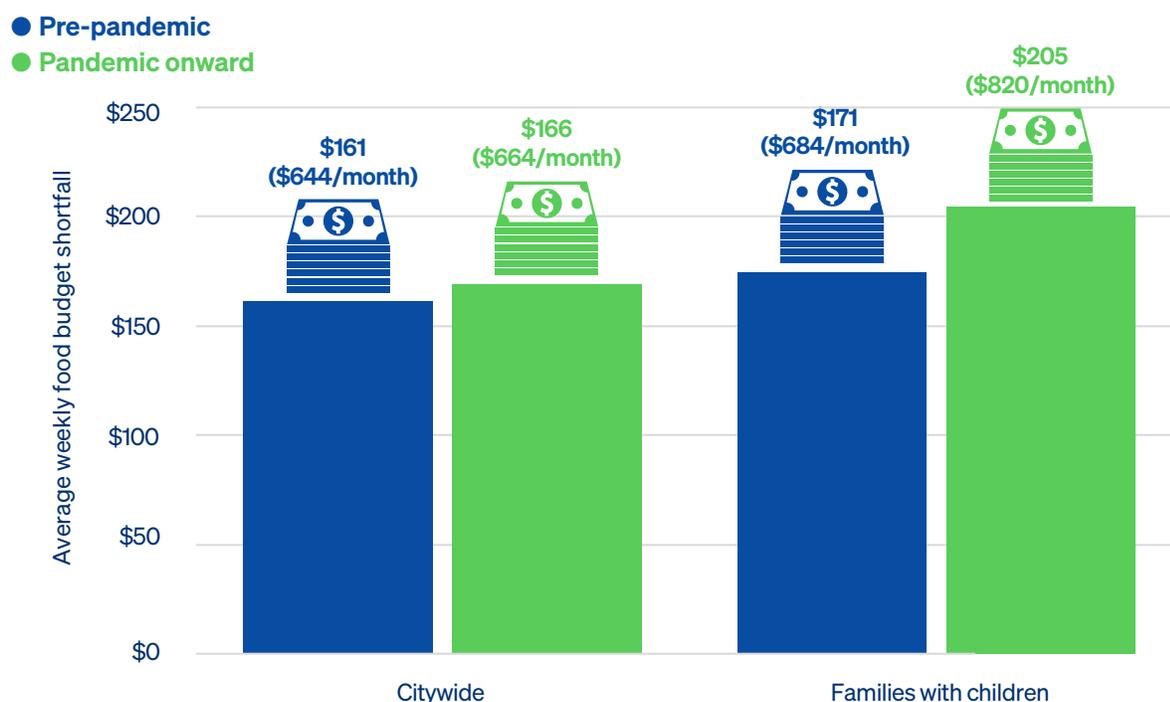
An inevitable question that follows from these trends is: how large are these budget shortfalls? For those respondents who report needing more money to meet their food needs, the Poverty Tracker asks a follow-up question about how much more money would be needed per week to meet these needs. Figure 6 shows that citywide, the weekly average food budget shortfall has remained relatively stable between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic period — at slightly over \$160. However, it is important to remember that the *share* of New Yorkers with a budget shortfall has increased (Figure 4). As a result, while the shortfall amounts are relatively similar in the pre-pandemic and pandemic onward periods, more New Yorkers are now facing this shortfall.

Rising food prices leave families scrambling

Anya, a city paraprofessional raising three children, once cooked oxtail—a lower cost cut of meat central to her Caribbean roots. Now even that’s unaffordable: **“Everything is going up so much and so quick.”** She scours multiple supermarkets each week for sales, looking for cheaper cuts of meat to make sure her children get needed protein, trading time and energy for marginal savings.

Figure 6

Amount of additional money needed per week by New Yorkers with a food budget shortfall to meet food costs (2025 dollars)



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2016, 2017, and 2023. Data from 2016 and 2017 are considered pre-pandemic, and data from 2023 are considered pandemic onward. Dollar amounts are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. Outliers beyond 3 times the interquartile range were excluded from the data. See Appendix Figures A1 and A2 for data by income.

Note: Analyzing results by different family sizes revealed similar trends and food budget shortfall amounts.

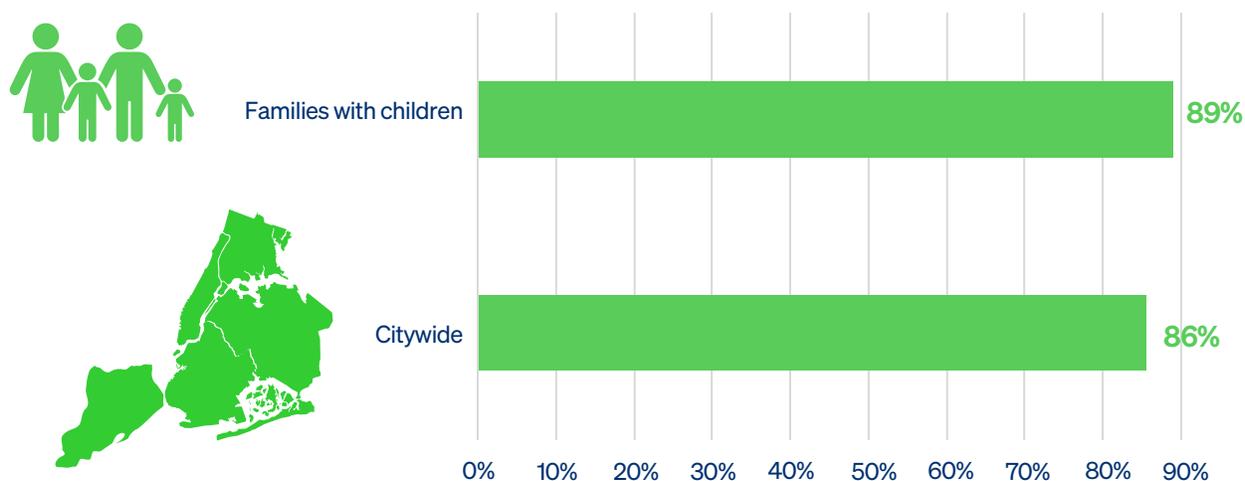
When it comes to families with children, the amount of additional money needed to meet food needs for those facing food budget shortfalls has increased by more than the citywide average. The average weekly food budget shortfall for families with children was relatively similar to the citywide average before the pandemic (\$171 vs. \$161). **But in recent years, the average weekly food budget shortfall for families with children has increased by more than \$30 (from \$171 per week to \$205 per week).** This substantial increase relative to the citywide average demonstrates the unique challenges faced by families with children when it comes to rising costs in the city.

Our past research has also shown that, contrary to some assumptions, many of those who use food pantries and other forms of food assistance are working New Yorkers.⁵ This same pattern also holds true when it comes to the population that reported not having enough money to meet their food needs (Figure 7). **Of those New Yorkers with a food budget shortfall, 86% were working in the past year or had a partner who was working, and this share was even higher among families with children (89%).** In other words, the vast majority of those struggling to meet their food needs are already working, and are *still* finding that their earnings are unable to keep pace with food costs.

⁵Wimer et al., "Spotlight on food assistance from New York City's pantry system."

Figure 7

Among New Yorkers with a food budget shortfall, what share were working in the past year or were in a family with a working adult?



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the fourth and fifth cohorts in 2023. Labor force participation defined as working or having a spouse that worked for at least one month during the year. The sample was limited to those respondents that were working-age (under 65).

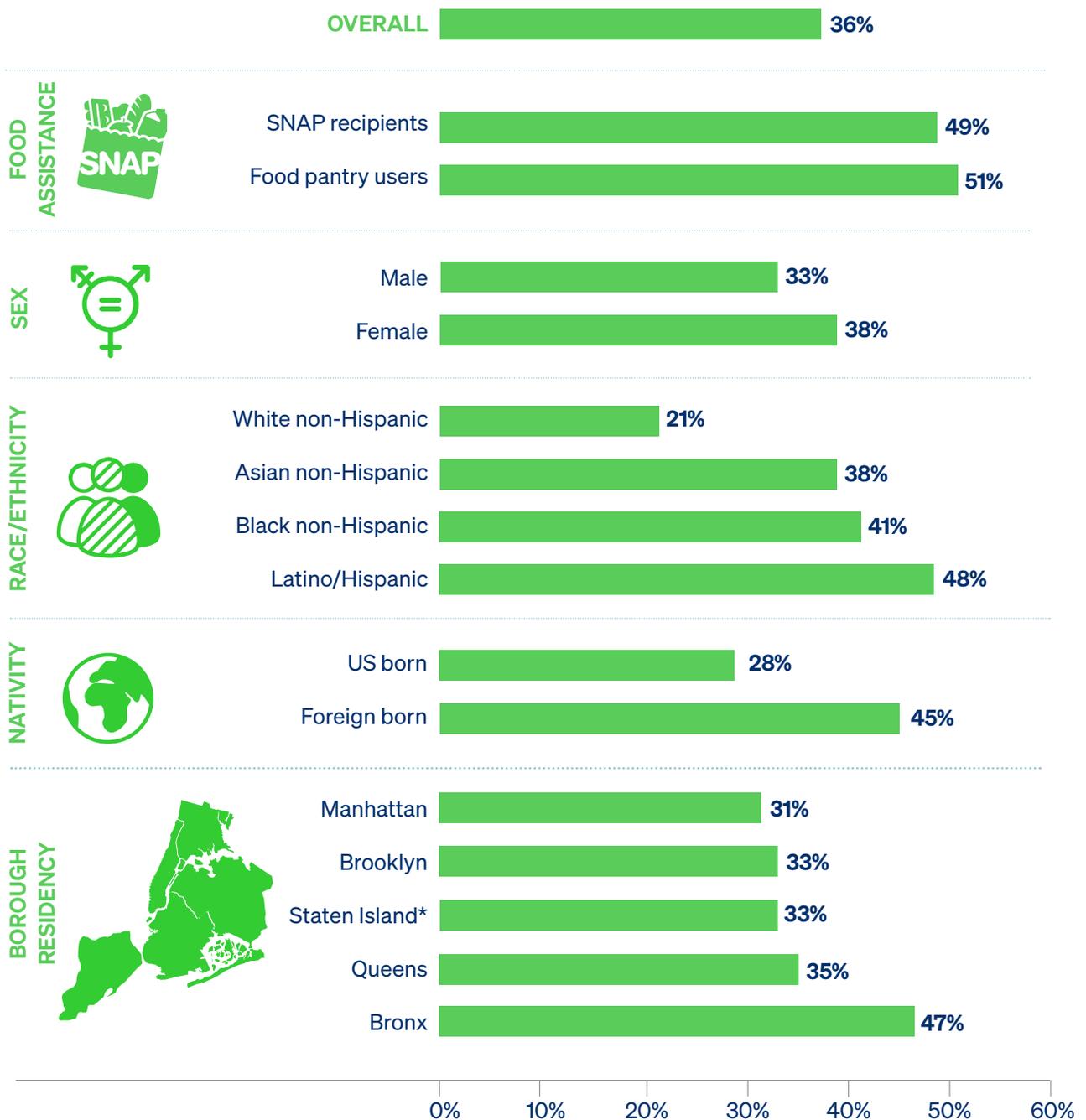
Food assistance restrictions exclude families in the missing middle

New Yorkers who fall outside eligibility for SNAP also struggle. Brianna, a single mother earning \$60,000, embodies the “missing middle”—too well-paid for SNAP, but not well paid enough to absorb rising costs. “I don’t qualify,” she said. “I have a young boy to feed. Grocery prices are insane.” Rent consumes a fixed share of her income, leaving food as the only budget line she can cut. For her, \$60,000 “used to be okay... now I still feel like I’m struggling.”

Importantly, the prevalence of food budget shortfall varies with respect to demographic factors in addition to income or labor force participation. Examining food budget shortfalls across participation in food assistance programs, sex, race, nativity, and borough for adult New Yorkers reveals sharp inequities across groups (Figure 8). **Since the onset of the pandemic, about half of SNAP recipients and food pantry users have reported needing more money to meet their food needs, highlighting the critical importance of these programs as a social safety net.** Similarly, in the same way that historically and presently marginalized groups face higher rates of poverty and hardship, communities of color, immigrants, and female New Yorkers face higher rates of food budget shortfall compared to their counterparts. For example, foreign-born New Yorkers face much higher rates of food budget shortfall than US-born New Yorkers (45% vs. 28%), which may reflect citizenship-based eligibility rules for public programs and other barriers to access.

Figure 8

Percent of adult New Yorkers with food budget shortfalls across different demographic groups, pandemic onward



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the fourth and fifth cohorts in 2023.

* Interpret with caution due to limited sample size.



Pete's Story: The reality of living check to check due to rising food costs

Pete is an 85-year-old retiree living on a fixed income that is increasingly being stretched thin by the rising cost of food and housing in New York City. He has lived with his partner for the past 31 years, and since his partner lost his job, the two have largely relied on Social Security and SNAP to make ends meet. But after paying rent, there is not much left to sustain them and they are often left in dire circumstances by the end of the month.

“At the moment, we are really going from check to check and for a quarter of the month we are down to the point where we almost don't have coffee...about a quarter of the month we are really, really hurting for money. Between the time we get our food stamps and when I get my Social Security...Every bite we put in our mouth I cook. Every bite. We have no money to go out to restaurants.”

Pete and his partner both receive SNAP, but they do not receive much from the program as Pete's Social Security income disqualifies him from receiving the maximum SNAP benefit. His *monthly* SNAP benefit is just \$23, and he notes that, **“Generally speaking the food stamp money is gone within a week.”** While every dollar of SNAP counts, the benefits of this critical program are also dwindling as food costs rise, putting further pressure on Pete and his partner's finances: **“Food has gone up during the past month. It just keeps getting higher and higher and higher, and there doesn't seem to be any hope.”** To supplement their food needs, they have also sought support from church-based food pantries, but these sources of support have also been limited: **“The things that they give out are meager at times, and it hasn't been a great deal. Maybe 4-5 times we've gone to a food thing and gotten some small items.”**

While programs like SNAP and community-based pantries play a critical role in supporting Pete and his partner, these experiences also demonstrate the insufficiency of the social safety net to fully support New Yorkers in meeting their basic needs. Many like Pete are forced into a devastating cycle of living paycheck to paycheck as they find their incomes increasingly unable to keep pace with rising prices throughout the city, suggesting that a more substantial and comprehensive response may be needed.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Affording food is a difficult challenge for many New Yorkers. Based on this report's findings, this challenge has only been exacerbated in recent years due to the rising costs of food and other necessities. With more than 1 in 3 adults in New York City reporting that they lack the money to buy needed food, it is clear that more supports are needed to ensure New York City can be a place where everyone can afford the basics. The fact that these food budget shortfalls extend well above the poverty line points to the wide-ranging impact of rising food prices throughout the city. For groups that experience elevated rates of poverty and hardship, such as foreign-born New Yorkers and communities of color, being unable to afford food continues to be the ever-present reality for far too many. At the same time, the recent and upcoming cuts to SNAP funding are likely to make these challenges even more severe.

Policymakers with a vested interest in combatting food hardship should consider additional city, state, and federal investments that would supplement families' resources. These could include:

1. Ensuring all eligible families receive federal and state refundable tax credits, such as the Empire State Child Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit;
2. Creating a minimum state-funded SNAP benefit to meet the gap in food purchase needs of all families, regardless of citizenship status;
3. Increasing funding for food pantries and other food providers through programs such as the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), Nourish NY, and Community Food Connection in order to meet increased demand across income levels;
4. Boosting funding for community-based organizations to facilitate enrollment in SNAP and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program;
5. Creating more secure Electronic Benefits Transfer systems to reduce the theft of SNAP benefits;
6. Exploring the creation of tax incentive programs to increase businesses' donations to food banks and pantries.

We know that effective policies can meaningfully reduce food hardship.^{6,7} Our data show that New Yorkers are clearly struggling to afford sufficient food for themselves and their families, and stronger and more effective supports are needed to ensure New Yorkers' health and well-being going forward.

⁶ Parolin et al, "The effects of the monthly and lump-sum Child Tax Credit payments on food and housing hardship."

⁷ Collyer et al, "The Effects of the 2021 Monthly Child Tax Credit on Child and Family Well-Being: Evidence from New York City."

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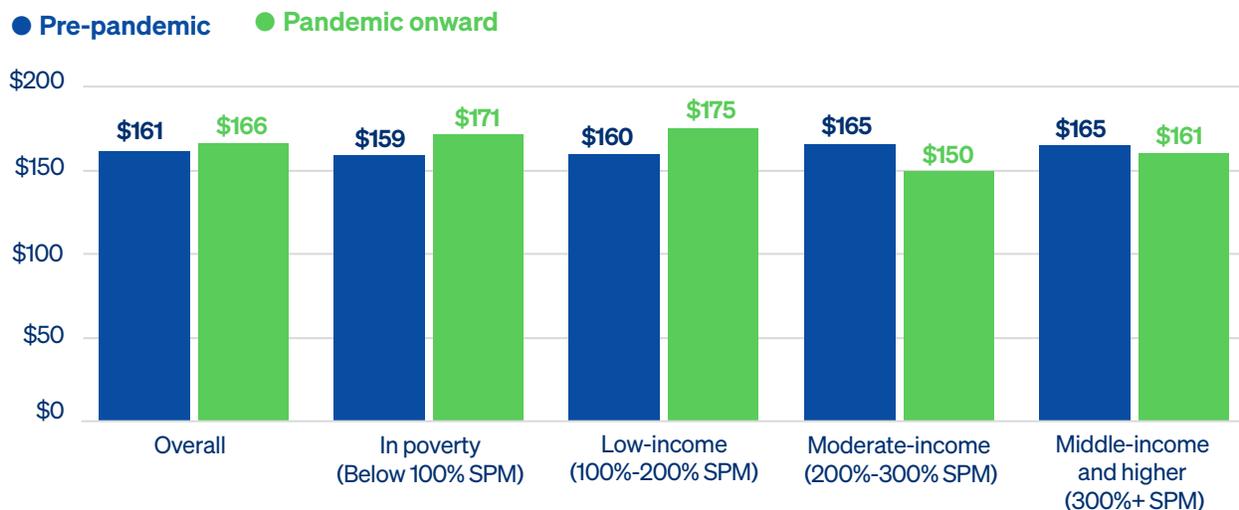
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APPENDIX.

Figure A1

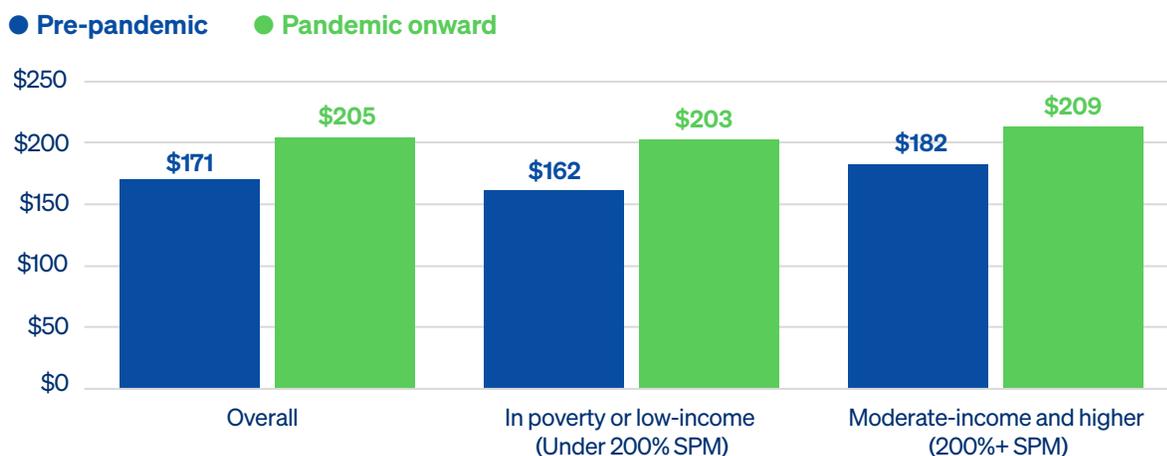
Weekly food budget shortfall for the adult population reporting needing more money to meet food needs by income



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2016, 2017, and 2023. Data from 2016 and 2017 are considered pre-pandemic, and data from 2023 are considered pandemic onward. Dollar amounts are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. Outliers beyond 3 times the interquartile range were excluded from the data.

Figure A2

Weekly food budget shortfall for families with children reporting needing more money to meet food needs by income



Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2016, 2017, and 2023. Data from 2016 and 2017 are considered pre-pandemic, and data from 2023 are considered pandemic onward. Dollar amounts are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. Outliers beyond 3 times the interquartile range were excluded from the data.