



GOAL 7

NY FOOD 2025

Increasing Community and Public Control and Ownership of New York City's Food System



**HUNTER COLLEGE
NEW YORK CITY
FOOD POLICY CENTER**



Suggested citation: Fraser KT, Ilieva RT, Chong VP, Shulman E, Willingham C, Freudenberg N and Cohen N. Increasing Community and Public Control and Ownership of New York City's Food System. Policy Recommendations for a Stronger, Healthier, More Just, and Sustainable Food System in NYC. New York Food 2025, a collaboration of The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center; The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College Columbia University; and, The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. March 2022. Corresponding author: Dr. Nevin Cohen; nevin.cohen@sph.cuny.edu.

NEW YORK FOOD 2025 GOAL 7

Increasing Community and Public Control and Ownership of New York City's Food System

[New York Food 2025](#) is a collaborative effort by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, and The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to examine the effects of the pandemic on New York City's food policies and programs and propose specific policy measures the NYC Mayor and City Council can consider and implement to build a stronger, healthier, more just, and sustainable food system in New York City. This policy brief is one part of a 7-part series of policy briefs and recommendations and builds on our group's earlier report, [New York Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond](#), on the impact of the pandemic on New York City's food system and food workforce.

Background

Despite many policy innovations over the past several decades New York City has had difficulty in making significant progress in reducing inequities related to its food system. Persistently high rates of food insecurity and hunger, racial and ethnic disparities in diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart diseases, and low wages and unsafe working conditions for food workers harm Black, Latinx communities, immigrants, and low income populations disproportionately, widening the city's gaps in well-being, and posing barriers to a healthier and more just city¹ (Figure 1).

Percentage of NYC Survey Respondents Reporting Running out of Money to Buy Food in Previous Month, by Race and Ethnicity

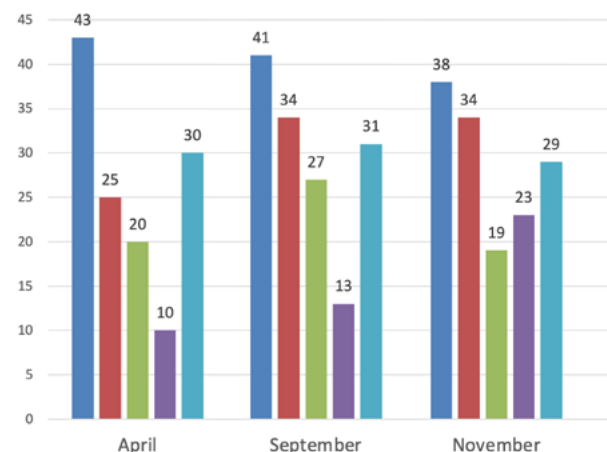


Figure 1. Results from the [CUNY School of Public Health COVID-19 Survey](#).

While the city's food system problems have multiple political, economic, and social causes, a common underlying determinant is insufficient support for food democracy, defined as the processes and structures that enable people to participate in shaping the food system. The sad truth is that most New Yorkers have no opportunity to participate in deciding on important issues such as the kinds of food stores in their neighborhoods and whether policies ensure that food retailers carry affordable, healthy, desirable products. They are unable to directly influence which public programs are subsidized, how easy or hard it is to enroll in programs like SNAP or WIC, and how vigorously laws protecting consumers and food workers are enforced. Even when new democratic mechanisms are enacted such as participatory budgeting, they are often so modest in scale they are more symbolic than substantive.

GOAL

In the next four years, the Mayor and City Council should take action to create a more democratic food system in which the city's residents and communities increase their power, control, and ownership of New York City's food system.

UNDERLYING CAUSES

Several characteristics of New York City's political economy contribute to the lack of food democracy. First, since the 1970s, the city's tax and economic policies, reinforced by state and federal policies, have contributed to widening economic inequality in which wealth and income have become increasingly concentrated in a small group of individuals and families.² While poverty rates in New York City have declined since 2013, inequality (as measured by the commonly used Gini coefficient which measures income concentration) has remained virtually unchanged, making New York one of the most unequal cities in the nation.³ Concentrated wealth is the foundation of concentrated political power⁴ and city elites have used that power to oppose, delay, or weaken measures to create more equitable housing, employment, health care, education and food policies and programs.

Second, the nation's governance system in which federal, state and city governments (and districts and public authorities) share power and sometimes overlapping or confusing mandates and budgetary authority makes it challenging for citizens to identify the political spaces in which they have a voice. In such a system, well-resourced special interests (e.g., manufacturers of unhealthy ultra-processed foods) can gain a larger voice in setting or blocking policy than, for example, the millions of individuals, families, and children at risk of dietary disease or food insecurity.

Third, few existing city governance mechanisms directly address food. Although there are more than 300 food policy councils across the nation to engage stakeholders in food policymaking, New York City has not yet created a food policy council. The New York City Council has no committee responsible for food, dividing oversight responsibilities among committees on health, sanitation, economic development, and other issue areas. The Mayor's Office of Food Policy, though an important institution, has lacked the resources to elicit suggestions or problems from the public on a regular basis. No public entity is adequately resourced or accountable to lead the critical work of educating and mobilizing consumers, voters and residents to engage actively in ensuring that city food policy meets their needs.

Finally, while many non-governmental organizations work actively to educate the public and policymakers on key food issues (e.g., school food, hunger and food insecurity, the rights of food workers), most focus on a single food system problem, seek to achieve specific food policy victories rather than to increase citizen power to shape the food system, and lack the political clout of established interests such as restaurant or grocery store trade associations or multinational food companies.

For the purposes of this brief, we define these terms for clarity:

- **Power** is the ability to influence food policy outcomes, through both formal (e.g., public review processes) and informal mechanisms (such as political activism.)
- **Control** is the ability to make decisions about issues affecting residents through mechanisms such as community board approval, allocation of city budgets through participatory budgeting, and resident-led conversion of empty lots into farms.
- **Ownership** means that residents own aspects of the food system, such as community-owned farms or worker owned food businesses. Ownership can also refer to private ownership for the public good, such as non-profits operating community kitchens and emergency food facilities.

Existing Programs and Policies

A number of current policies and practices offer some degree of support for resident power, control, and ownership of New York City's food system.

POWER

Neighborhood level food councils throughout NYC, such as the [Washington Heights & Inwood \(WHIN\) Food Council](#) and the [Fort Greene-Clinton Hill Community Food Council](#), provide platforms for community efforts towards collective policy action and resident-led projects to address food access, food security, and food sovereignty. Prominent community based organizations such as [Equity Advocates](#), [Community Food Advocates](#), [Hunger](#)

[Solutions New York](#), and [Hunger Free America](#) regularly solicit resident priorities and advocate for local and state level policies to support their interests.

Section 197-a of the NYC City Charter authorizes plans for the improvement of the city, its boroughs, and communities.⁵ Such plans can be sponsored by community boards and borough boards, providing residents an avenue for organizing and pursuing specific food system agendas. NYC also collects and maintains a number of public datasets that provide information on real-time food systems data, with the intention of facilitating resident participation in land use, budget decisions, and legislative hearings. Additionally, the NYC Food Metrics Report⁶ strengthens food democracy by making food systems data available for public decision-making.

CONTROL

Since 2011, participatory budgeting in NYC has demonstrated the feasibility of a democratic process by which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget, thus allowing for allocation of local budgets to food related projects. Participatory budgeting “funds physical infrastructure projects that benefit the public, cost at least \$50,000 and have a lifespan of at least 5 years. Local improvements to schools, parks, libraries, public housing, streets and other public spaces can be funded through this process.”⁷ Further, laws and regulations enable and support resident action for safe food production (e.g. zoning regulations allowing urban farms and gardens in residential, commercial, and manufacturing districts⁸), food manufacturing (e.g., cottage food laws⁹), and food retail (e.g. mobile food vending regulations.¹⁰) The Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) and public hearings held by the Department of City Planning for zoning changes are opportunities for public participation in development and land use, though effects on food systems have not systematically been considered in these processes.¹¹ However,

overlapping mandates across multiple city agencies create a complex net of governance that stymies resident participation in these various processes.¹²

OWNERSHIP

The NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS), alongside the NYC City Council, supports the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative.¹³ Though not explicitly food related, expansion of such public services to facilitate worker cooperatives in the food sector can support food system ownership (e.g. [the Central Brooklyn Food Coop.](#)) Mechanisms such as land trusts (for example, [Brooklyn Alliance of Neighborhood Gardeners](#)) preserve land for the benefit of the public, often resulting in community gardens and other urban agriculture projects. In recent years, the number of community land trusts in New York City has grown from just one in 2019 to about a dozen that have been established or are in the process of being established.¹⁴ Another example of food systems community ownership is the hundreds of urban gardens and farms on New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) campuses. Though privately owned by the City, NYCHA land is largely reserved for gardening and use solely by NYCHA residents.¹⁵

Policy recommendations

In order to achieve the goal of increasing community and public control and ownership of New York City's food system, the Mayor and City Council should consider the following recommendations.



By the end of 2022, the Mayor and City Council should:

Provide City agencies charged with monitoring outcomes related to food (e.g., Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, NYC DOHMH, DOE, Mayor's Office of Food Policy) the resources and mandates to produce regular reports on the impact implementation of City policies and enforcement of laws on food equity outcomes. As part of the Mayor's effort to streamline data and information technology¹⁶ the City should revise the Mayor's Office of Food Policy's Annual Food Metrics Report to be available through user-friendly dashboards that communities, elected officials and others can use to track progress towards food equity goals. The annual New York City Food Metrics Reports have established a foundation for monitoring food policy across City agencies. But they have several shortcomings that can be addressed by including: (1) outcome measures instead of program outputs; (2) denominators for relevant metrics to show the extent to which policies designed to change outcomes affect the wider population; and (3) additional indicators to measure aspects of the food system (e.g., food costs) not collected by city agencies or available through conventional public sources, using smart technologies, crowdsourcing, location tracking, embedded sensors, and other innovations to collect and analyze such data. Food systems data are often scattered across agencies, and insufficiently disaggregated to identify racial, ethnic, or spatial disparities, hindering effective and equitable management of municipal food programs. Efforts to ensure that data are collected and managed so that

multiple agencies and the public can access and use such data to determine the extent to which inequities exist is essential. One step is to have the newly created Office of Technology and Innovation use food metrics as a case study in such inter-agency data integration. Another is to require data collected by private companies to enhance their ability to market food, manage food workers, and track food flows to be accessible to the City agencies responsible for managing the food system.



Between 2022 and 2025, the Mayor and the City Council should:

Support community organizations to develop and implement community food plans across NYC. The publication of the city’s 10-year food plan, Food Forward NYC,¹⁷ was a major step in describing the state of the food system and strategies for making it more just, healthy and environmentally beneficial. However, many elements of the food system, from the location of grocery stores, fast food restaurants, food pantries, outdoor food advertising, and community farms, to the delivery of city food services (e.g., congregate meals, SNAP and WIC enrollment, hospital based nutrition programs) are based on land use, budget, and agency service delivery decisions made at the community level. Community based food plans developed by or in coordination with community boards would engage New Yorkers at the neighborhood level in developing strategies tailored to the unique circumstances of individual communities. We recommend that the City provide funds and technical assistance to enable community districts throughout New York City to develop food plans that are consistent with the overall goals and priorities of the citywide food plan, the city’s zoning text, and other adopted plans and policies. These neighborhood plans should be developed under the NYC Charter 197-a process so that they are formally adopted as plans and therefore require conformance with other plans and adherence to by City agencies.

Establish and support training and educational programs in schools, community organizations and universities to prepare New York City’s young people and community leaders to be effective advocates for food justice and food equity. For example, the City could create a collaborative NYC Youth Food Justice Corps to support existing and new groups to enable young people to develop and implement campaigns and initiatives to improve NYC food environments. It is a cliché that young people are the future, but this concept is clearly demonstrated within the food workforce, a sector that attracts youth with an abundance of entry-level work. The City regularly invests in programs like the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) which provides workforce development training and career exploration opportunities to New Yorkers age 14 to 24. By specifically developing career pathways within the food justice sector, young people can have a direct influence on the city’s food system, identify opportunities for growth, and advocate on behalf of food justice initiatives. Youth food programs have already demonstrated their success in NYC, from GrowNYC’s Youthmarkets to the CUNY Food Justice Leadership Fellowship. A NYC Youth Food Justice Corps could recruit young, passionate leaders and help them to attain careers in the food sector that offer a livable wage and benefits and safe working conditions and which also produce, distribute, or sell healthy and affordable food. At the same time, increased funding should be allocated towards existing community food programs with expertise in youth organizing, such as the [Youth Food Advocates](#), to support the training of young people to advocate for public policy changes and to mobilize youth food leaders across the city.

Create spaces and processes in which those New Yorkers most adversely affected by food system problems have the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the laws and policies that affect their well-being. Ensuring that community members play a meaningful part in developing food policy should be a priority for New York City elected officials. A collaborative approach that involves various stakeholders equitably in every phase of the process should be rooted in acknowledging the assets that everyone brings to the table. One way to increase democratic engagement in the food system is by each community district designating a food policy liaison that acts as a two-way conduit for sharing information between government and district residents. Additionally, the city government should commit resources to implementing online polling, data collection, and public commenting techniques modeled after participatory budgeting to make it easier for citizens to voice their opinions on food policy issues, know that those comments are received, and draft legislation. Special efforts should be made to engage teenagers and seniors to instill a sense of ownership in the policy making process by two groups that are typically underrepresented in food policy discussions. Other possible actions include: Hold annual meetings in each borough to provide updates on progress made towards achieving the goals detailed in Food Forward NYC: A 10-Year Food Policy Plan and to explain findings from the annual NYC Food Metrics Report; Implement a youth food policy council to capture the thoughts of young people and provide them with a platform to engage with food policy.

Develop and enhance laws, policies and programs that limit the power of food businesses to make decisions for financial gain that disregard the well-being of New York City residents. While the recovery of food retail, restaurant and hospitality businesses in NYC is critical to the city's economic revival, food sector businesses should not prioritize their bottom line at the cost of their employees, or communities, health and well-being. Recent City Council laws that protect app-based delivery workers, and the in committee [NY State Senate Bill S7487A](#) to limit the predatory marketing of unhealthy food to children are examples of such laws that should be scaled in the years to come.

References

- ¹ New York Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond. The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, and The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. September 2020. <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2020/10/5/new-york-food-2020-vision-research-and-recommendations-during-covid-19-and-beyond>.
- ² Poverty Tracker Research Group at Columbia University. The State of Poverty and Disadvantage in New York City. Volume 3. 2021. https://www.robinhood.org/wp-content/themes/robinhood/images/poverty-tracker/pdfs/Annual_Report_Vol_3.pdf.
- ³ Honan K. New York City's Income-Inequality Gap Hasn't Changed, Report Says. The Wall Street Journal. September 11, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-citys-income-inequality-gap-hasnt-changed-report-says-11568174460>.
- ⁴ As Inequality Grows, So Does the Political Influence of the Rich. The Economist. July 21, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/07/21/as-inequality-grows-so-does-the-political-influence-of-the-rich>.
- ⁵ NYC Waterfront Revitalization Program, Planning Coordination Division. 197-a Plan Process. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/applicants/wrp/197a_presentation.pdf.
- ⁶ Food Metrics Report, 2021. NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Metrics-Report-2021.pdf>.
- ⁷ Participatory Budgeting. New York City Council. <https://council.nyc.gov/pb/>.
- ⁸ Frequently Asked Questions. NYC Urban Agriculture. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/agriculture/faqs/frequently-asked-questions.page>.
- ⁹ Forrager Cottage Food Community. Can You Legally Sell Food From Home in New York? <https://forrager.com/law/new-york/>.
- ¹⁰ Rules and Regulations for Mobile Food Vending. NYC Health. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/rii/rules-regs-mfv.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Mapping the Future. ULURP Explained. City Limits. <https://citylimits.org/zonein/ulurp-explained/>.
- ¹² Freudenýg N, Cohen N, Poppendieck J, and Willingham C. Ten Years of Food Policy Governance in New York City: Lessons for the Next Decade. Fordham Urban Law Journal. 2018; 45: 951. <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol45/iss4/2>.
- ¹³ Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative. NYC Business. <https://www1.nyc.gov/nycbusiness/article/worker-cooperatives>.
- ¹⁴ Castillo, MF, Petryczka S, Choi-Li J, Ludwig K, and Li Y. Mapping for Community-Driven Neighbourhood Planning: The Case of the South Bronx Land and Community Resource Trust. GI Forum. 2019; 7, 148–170. doi:10.1553/giscience2019_01_s148
- ¹⁵ Pathways to Land Access. Living Lots NYC by 596 Acres. <https://livinglotsnyc.org/resources/pathways/>.
- ¹⁶ Mayor Adams Creates More Efficient Government by Consolidating City Tech Agencies Under New Office of Technology and Innovation. NYC Office of the Mayor. January 19, 2022. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/039-22/mayor-adams-creates-more-efficient-government-consolidating-city-tech-agencies-under-new-office#0>.
- ¹⁷ Food Forward NYC: A 10-Year Food Policy Plan. New York City Mayor's Office of Food Policy. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/foodpolicy/reports-and-data/food-forward.page>.