

THE HIDDEN COST OF LIVING: A MEMO ON HOW HOUSING INSTABILITY DRIVES FOOD INSECURITY IN NYC



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I. The Landscape of Food Insecurity and Housing Prices in New York City (NYC)

According to 2024 Feeding America data, 15% of New Yorkers face food insecurity, defined as someone who does not have enough to eat and may not know where their next meal will come from.¹ The rate of food insecurity among children in NYC is much higher (24%).² Food insecurity is often compounded by other financial challenges. Roughly 50% of working-age households do not have enough income to cover the monthly cost of housing, food, childcare, healthcare, and transportation.³ Financial stressors can be especially challenging in NYC, which has one of the highest housing price-to-income ratios in the country⁴—a disparity that disproportionately impacts communities of color and seniors.⁵ This brief describes how housing instability (e.g., homelessness, sheltered living, pending evictions) contributes to high rates of food insecurity in the greater NYC area and provides evidence-based policy recommendations to address these two issues.

II. The Links Between Housing and Food Insecurity

Studies have demonstrated strong associations between food insecurity and housing stability,⁶ with those experiencing food insecurity facing additional hardships such as childcare and healthcare costs.^{7,8} Individuals struggling with housing instability are also more likely to experience food insecurity, and vice versa. A study examining this bidirectional relationship over a two-year period found that families experiencing housing instability had 40% higher odds of experiencing food insecurity, while families experiencing food insecurity had 62% higher odds of experiencing housing instability.⁹ Current policies address these two issues independently, rather than recognizing their interconnection, which exacerbates the competition between housing and food costs.^{9,10} This lack of policy synergy leaves individuals with less control over their household budgets, often forcing them to choose between basic essentials.^{7,11,12} Furthermore, individuals frequently resort to making less healthful dietary choices when constrained by limited budgets.^{10,11} A study examining the relationship between diet quality and housing instability in urban settings found that housing instability was associated with poorer diet quality among parents. Those parents also scored in the lowest quartile of the Healthy Eating Index.¹³

III. Policy Recommendations

Research has demonstrated a bidirectional relationship between housing instability and food insecurity. This burden is particularly severe in NYC, where the high cost of living exceeds national averages. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive, holistic approach that recognizes and addresses the deep links between housing instability and food insecurity. The 2024 zoning initiative “City of Yes for Housing Opportunity” highlights the potential

of zoning changes to address housing instability by increasing housing supply and improving infrastructure.¹⁴ Such initiatives complement efforts to strengthen and expand housing voucher programs by making stable housing more accessible and allowing families to redirect resources to food and other basic needs. Additionally, investing in eviction prevention programs is critical to stabilizing families at risk of losing their homes or being forced to relocate.^{15,16,17} Stable housing serves as the foundation for economic security, making it an essential tool to address housing instability, which can in turn help curb the rise of food insecurity. Conversely, strengthening and expanding food assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC can alleviate some of the housing instability that families face by freeing up limited financial resources for rent.^{18,19} Policymakers can mitigate economic security, and its cascading effects, by supporting housing plans that leverage the City's assets, reduce regulatory barriers to increase NYC's affordable housing supply, and provide additional funding to initiatives that address the root causes of housing loss.

The NYU Food Environment and Policy Research Coalition is comprised of faculty, staff members, and students who—through community-based and interdisciplinary research—aim to shape food environments that are health-driven, sustainable, and equitable. The Coalition conducts research that informs policy change on a range of topics to reduce disparities in nutrition and health.

To keep up with the NYU Food Environment and Policy Research Coalition, please visit us at www.nycfoodresearch.org or follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).

City Harvest is New York's first and largest food rescue organization, collecting high-quality, nutritious food that would otherwise go to waste to help provide free food for millions of New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity. Since our founding in 1982, we have rescued more than one billion pounds of fresh, nutritious food and delivered it—free of charge—to hundreds of food pantries, soup kitchens, community partners, and our own Mobile Markets® across the five boroughs. This year, we will rescue and distribute more than 81 million pounds of nutritious food to our neighbors in need. By redirecting that food to families, we will also prevent the equivalent of more than 24 million kilograms of CO2 from entering the atmosphere.

Named one of America's Top 100 Charities by Forbes, City Harvest also works alongside our community partners to build their capacity, expand nutrition education, and advocate for systems change through effective public policy. For more than 40 years, City Harvest has been there to feed our city—one day, one meal, one New Yorker at a time.

To learn more, please visit cityharvest.org.

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