

# TOO COSTLY TO CARE: A MEMO ON HOW CHILDCARE INSECURITY FUELS HUNGER IN NYC

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

According to the 2025 report by Feeding America entitled “Map the Meal Gap,” 17% of New Yorkers experience food insecurity, which is defined as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”<sup>1</sup> The rate among children in NYC is much higher (24%).<sup>2</sup> Roughly 63% of NYC households with children do not have enough income to cover the monthly cost of housing and basic living expenses, including food, childcare, healthcare, and transportation.<sup>3,4</sup> A recent brief from the Citizens Committee for Children of New York found that 80% of caregivers in New York City consider childcare unaffordable.<sup>5,6</sup> These families often experience childcare hardship forcing them to either reduce their hours, stop care entirely, or rely on inadequate alternatives due to a lack of affordable options.

Families in poverty often have limited funds to cover expenses like childcare, food, utilities, and other necessary expenses after rent.<sup>5</sup> Between 2021 and 2023, childcare costs in Queens rose by 22% while median earnings increased by only 9%.<sup>8,9</sup> This highlights a growing gap between income and the rising cost of childcare. In Bronx neighborhoods such as Mott Haven and Hunts Point, many families spend up to 63% of their income on childcare.<sup>10</sup> The challenges faced by residents of Queens and the Bronx reflect broader trends seen across NYC, highlighting city-wide struggles with access to these essential services.<sup>8,9</sup> According to a report released by UNICEF of data collected on 41 high-income countries, the United States ranked 40th for best practices in childcare policies and parental leave support.<sup>11</sup> This brief will describe how the lack of affordable childcare exacerbates food insecurity in New York City and provides evidence-based policy recommendations to address these two issues.

## II. The Links Between Childcare and Food Insecurity

While food and housing are prominent competing expenses, families experiencing food insecurity and housing instability also struggle with accessing affordable and reliable childcare, forcing them to patch together informal childcare arrangements provided by relatives, friends, and/or neighbors.<sup>12</sup> In many instances these families are struggling with food security and participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), energy assistance, and housing subsidies.<sup>12</sup> Children in informal non-relative care provided by a neighbor, friend, or sitter have higher odds of living in food insecure homes compared to children who are in formal childcare.<sup>12</sup>

Research shows that childcare programs that provide food and snacks during childcare reduce the strain on families to provide adequate nutrition at home.<sup>13</sup> Programs participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) play a critical role in this effort, offering nutritious meals to children during childcare hours, which can reduce food insecurity for families<sup>14</sup> and improve child health outcomes.<sup>15</sup> However, participation in CACFP is not universal, and access to its benefits can vary significantly across different childcare settings. While childcare centers that receive CACFP funding are more likely to screen children and families for food insecurity, only 3 out of 5 licensed childcare centers in low-income areas participate in the program.<sup>16,17</sup>

In addition to affordability challenges, NYC also faces a significant childcare shortage. For every available childcare slot in NYC, there are more than three children-under the age of 5 years—who need it.<sup>18</sup> There is a high turnover of childcare providers who leave as a result of low wages and lack of benefits. Childcare workers have the lowest median personal income of all care workers in NYC—just \$25,000 as of 2023. That salary equates to 45 percent of the median income, approximately \$55,000, of non-childcare workers.<sup>19,20</sup> This instability extends beyond care workers, with nearly half of mothers in NYC reporting at least one childcare-related work disruption, and 29 percent experiencing job turnover as a result.<sup>21</sup>

### **III. Policy Recommendations**

Expanding and strengthening programs like the NYS Empire State Child Tax Credit,<sup>22</sup> NYC Child Care Tax Credit, SNAP, CACFP, and childcare assistance is key to supporting low- to- moderate-income families who struggle to afford childcare. These resources help families navigate the interconnected challenges of food insecurity, rising childcare costs, and overall financial stress.<sup>19,23,24</sup> However, many of these resources are limited by contentious municipal budgets and strict eligibility rules, leaving many families without the help they need.<sup>18,25,26</sup> Boosting the NYC Child Tax Credit can provide families meaningful financial relief, helping them to afford everyday essentials like groceries, rent, and childcare.<sup>27</sup>

Increasing SNAP benefits, which support nearly 560,000 children across New York City,<sup>28</sup> directly combats food insecurity by ensuring access to nutritious meals while freeing up income for other essential needs.<sup>19</sup> Expanding programs like the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) would ensure that children receive nutritious meals at childcare centers and after school programs, alleviating stress on parents.<sup>11,20</sup> Paid family leave also plays a vital role in supporting family stability and child well-being allowing parents to care for their children during critical periods without sacrificing income.<sup>21,22</sup> Ensuring that this holistic approach to improving access to childcare and reducing child hunger is powered by partnerships between local government and community advocates can foster new ideas and greater opportunities to advance these strategies, as seen in the NYS Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council.<sup>29</sup> Expanding access to these programs and increasing funding could have a significant impact on the lives of thousands of families across NYC. Ultimately, investing in these programs means investing in healthier children, stronger families, and a more equitable future for families in New York City.

**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](http://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](http://cityharvest.org).

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