

MEALS FOR GOOD

SUPERMARKET AND GROCERY
STORE VOUCHER AND GIFT CARD
PILOT PROGRAM



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



Acknowledgements

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Overview

Overview

East Harlem and the South Bronx in New York City have some of the highest rates of poverty and food insecurity in the country. The poverty rate in East Harlem is 34.0 percent and in the South Bronx it is 39.6 percent, compared to 16.0 percent Citywide.¹ The rate of food insecurity in East Harlem is 22.4 percent² and in the South Bronx it is 23.8 percent,³ compared to 12.9 percent Citywide.⁴ Poverty, along with lack of access to affordable housing and employment opportunities with fair wages and benefits, is closely associated with poor health and food insecurity.^{5,6} Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these issues, increasing food insecurity rates and putting many communities with already high rates of poverty and diet-related disease at increased risk.^{7,8}

To combat the issue of poverty and food insecurity in East Harlem and the South Bronx, [Meals For Good, Inc.](#) (MFG) developed a supermarket-based food voucher and gift card program funded by the [Robin Hood Foundation](#), a poverty-fighting charitable organization based in New York. MFG

created vouchers and gift cards for buying foods at designated supermarkets (vouchers in East Harlem), and any grocery store or bodega (gift cards in the South Bronx). MFG partnered with three community-based organizations in East Harlem and one in the South Bronx to distribute the vouchers and gift cards to residents experiencing food insecurity in June and July 2021.

Individuals and families (“MFG Participants”) received a one-time incentive to purchase food at local grocery stores, in the form of vouchers or gift cards. Vouchers were in \$10 increments: individuals received \$40 and families received \$70. MFG Participants were able to use these vouchers at two participating supermarkets in East Harlem for food purchases (not including hot or prepared food purchases, alcoholic beverages, supplements, and non-food items), following the same [guidelines as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#). The participating supermarkets printed out a duplicate receipt which was then shared with the Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center

research team. MFG Participants located in the South Bronx received gift cards that could be used at any nearby supermarket or bodega for food; participants were asked to deposit receipts from these purchases into a safe drop box located at the community organization from which they had received the gift cards. The Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center research team indexed, analyzed, and evaluated all receipts (“MFG receipt data”) received from participating supermarkets and from the safe drop box.

The analysis of the MFG receipt data revealed that the majority of MFG Participants’ purchases were of meat (26.7 percent), fresh produce (15.6 percent) and pantry staples (14.1 percent). This data was then compared to foods typically purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households as well as [American household food expenditures using the 2020 Consumer Expenditure Survey](#) to determine whether the purchasing habits of MFG Participants differed from the general public.⁹ It was found that the purchasing habits of MFG Participants

closely resembled that of the average American household: respondents to the 2020 Consumer Expenditure Survey mainly bought meat (20.1 percent of total dollars spent), pantry staples (17.5 percent of total dollars spent), and fresh produce (13.1 percent of total dollars spent) in 2020.¹⁰

Key Findings

- MFG Participants bought foods that are not frequently provided at food pantries, such as meat products, oil, and spices.
- The food purchasing habits of MFG Participants were similar to those of the average American household: the majority of money for food was spent on meat, fresh produce, and pantry staples.
- Supermarket-based voucher programs may allow for greater autonomy of food choices.



Background

Background

New York City Food Insecurity

In 2019, nearly 1.2 million New York City residents (“New Yorkers”) experienced food insecurity,¹¹ defined by the USDA as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”¹² The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue of food insecurity, especially among New Yorkers who were already struggling. Major shifts in economic conditions, such as increased food prices and loss or decline in individual incomes, led to skyrocketing rates of food insecurity.¹³ By 2020, more than 1.6 million people citywide were food insecure (including 1 in 4 children), an increase of 36 percent from pre-pandemic levels.¹⁴

Food insecurity and poor access to healthy food disproportionately impact underserved communities of color in New York City (“the City”),^{15,16,17,18} especially Black and Latinx communities.¹⁹ In the South Bronx, for example, local corner stores such as bodegas (which typically carry mostly pre-packaged processed foods)²⁰ outnumber supermarkets 25 to one,²¹ and fast-food outlets, which have less nutritious but more affordable meals, are prominent.²²

Many food relief programs and community organizations (e.g., SNAP, food pantries, at-home meal delivery assistance) that existed before COVID-19 were not equipped to respond to the severe increase in food insecurity which impacted New Yorkers.²³ At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City worked immediately and aggressively to provide food resources to food-insecure New Yorkers.²⁴ This included expansion of funding for emergency food programs as well as new food initiatives (such as GetFoodNYC, Nourish New York, and Grab-and-Go meals provided by the NYC Department of Education).²⁵ As a result of the pandemic, food relief organizations such as [City Harvest](#) and [Food Bank for New York City](#) reported significant strains on their systems.²⁶ Hungry New Yorkers waited in long lines for hours to receive shelf-stable food items at food pantries; additionally, many had difficulty accessing meat, fresh foods, and culturally-specific and familiar food items.²⁷ Additionally, many City agencies faced issues adapting and expanding their food relief programs to meet specific cultural needs.²⁸

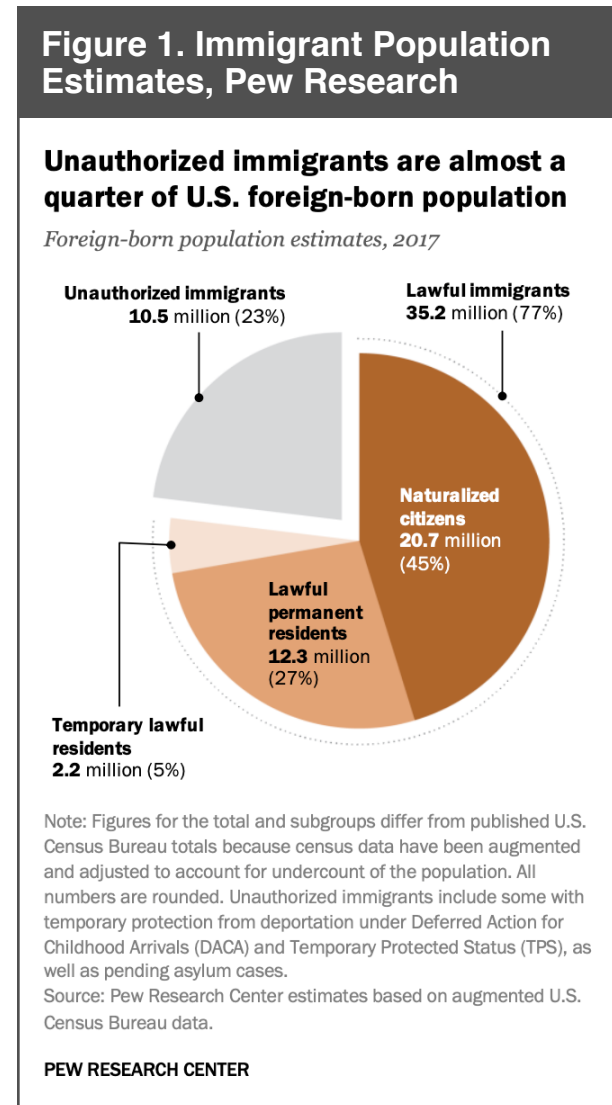


SNAP and Other Federal Assistance Programs

The [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) is the nation’s largest federal nutrition program.²⁹ SNAP beneficiaries receive monthly benefits, based on need, loaded onto an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, which can be used to purchase food.³⁰ As of 2019, more than 1.6 million New Yorkers (about 20 percent of the City’s population) were enrolled in SNAP,³¹ including families with adults earning low-wage incomes, unemployed workers, and people with fixed incomes such as Social Security benefits.³²

Although research has shown that SNAP can reduce food insecurity,^{33,34} benefits often fall short of meeting household needs.^{35,36} Many households that receive SNAP benefits struggle to make their benefits last the entire month.³⁷ [Research](#) from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities showed that SNAP users need up to \$20 more each week in benefits to meet their basic need for food, and more than half of SNAP recipients use all of their benefits for the month within the first two weeks.³⁸ Allotments for SNAP benefits are set at the federal level and are the same across all states, not accounting for the higher cost of living in certain areas.³⁹ In New York City, where the cost of living is higher than other urban areas in the U.S.,⁴⁰ households receiving SNAP benefits might find it especially difficult to afford nutritionally adequate food.⁴¹ [According to the USDA](#), the cost of nutritious food is a major barrier to maintaining a healthy diet among SNAP participants.⁴² Affording adequate food is made even more difficult by increased grocery food prices, which, according to the [USDA’s 2022 Food Price Outlook](#), increased by 10.0 percent between March 2021 and March 2022.⁴³

In New York State, households must have a gross income at or below 150 percent of the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines](#) to be eligible for SNAP.⁴⁴ In 2019, nearly one-third of the food-insecure people in New York State earned more than 200 percent of the Poverty Guidelines, disqualifying them from federal nutrition programs like SNAP.⁴⁵ Despite these households making more than the income requirements for federal assistance, many of them still experience food insecurity.⁴⁶



Immigration status adds yet more complexity to SNAP eligibility. According to [estimates from the Pew Research Center](#) as shown in Figure 1, more than 60 million people living in the United States are foreign-born, including 20.7 million naturalized citizens, 12.3 million lawful permanent residents, 2.2 million temporary lawful residents, and 10.5 million undocumented immigrants.⁴⁷ All foreign-born people living in the United States who are not naturalized citizens are considered ‘non-citizens’, which includes (but is not limited to): lawful permanent residents (known as green card holders), refugees, and undocumented immigrants.⁴⁸ [SNAP eligibility based on immigration status](#) is incredibly complex,

and a summary of populations eligible and ineligible for SNAP can be found in Table 1. Non-citizens who are eligible for SNAP (“eligible non-citizens”), shown on the left column of Table 1, include certain lawful permanent residents, refugees, and individuals who reside with eligible and/or U.S. citizen children under the age of 18.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, many immigrants with non-citizen status are not eligible to receive SNAP benefits.⁵⁰ Non-citizens who are not eligible for SNAP (“ineligible non-citizens”), shown on the right column of Table 1, include undocumented immigrants and lawful permanent residents who have resided in the United States for fewer than five years.

Table 1. SNAP Eligibility Based On Immigration Status⁵¹

“Eligible Non-Citizens”	“Ineligible Non-Citizens”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawful permanent residents (LPRs)* • Lawfully present non-citizen children under the age of 18 • Refugees • Asylees* • Parolees* • Individuals granted withholding of deportation • Conditional entrants* • Cuban or Haitian entrants • Iraqi and Afghan special immigrants • Battered non-citizens* • Victims of severe trafficking • Certain Native Americans born abroad • Hmong or Highland Laotian tribal members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-citizens who are lawfully present in the U.S. in a non-qualified status (e.g., students and Visa workers) • Undocumented non-citizens • Individuals granted Temporary Protection Status • LPRs who have lawfully resided in the U.S. for less than five years, or who have less than 40 qualifying work quarters (about 10 cumulative years of work)

* indicates groups of non-citizens who must meet one additional condition, such as five years of residence, 40 qualifying work quarters, disability or blindness, or military connection.

The percentage of eligible non-citizens enrolled in SNAP in the City has been in decline since 2017.⁵² Many eligible non-citizens have either withdrawn from or decided not to enroll in SNAP and other public benefits programs.⁵³ From 2017 to 2019, the rate of decline for eligible non-citizens (17.1 percent) was more than double that of eligible U.S. citizens (6 percent), which translated to about 25,000 fewer New Yorkers enrolled in the program than expected by the City.⁵⁴ Evidence suggests that the decline during this two year period was accelerated by the “public charge” rule proposed under the Trump Administration.^{55,56,57,58} Although the proposed rule was widely opposed and ultimately did not pass, it led to fear of potential immigration consequences related to benefit use and made many immigrant families afraid to seek public benefits altogether.^{59,60} Food pantries and soup kitchens have reported an increase in participation by immigrant families who would rather wait in line for food than risk being identified by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).⁶¹

Individuals who do not qualify for SNAP based on citizenship status might be eligible for food benefits through the [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#), which is available to low-income pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants (up to age 1), and children (up to age 5), regardless of immigration status.^{62,63} Access to nutritional and health resources provided by WIC, including regular health check ups and nutrition education sessions, is required to maintain benefits.⁶⁴ Therefore, WIC-eligible women may face structural barriers that prevent them from participating in WIC. [A population study on WIC-eligible women in New York City](#) showed that common barriers to participation in receiving WIC benefits include poor or unreliable access to transportation to and from WIC centers and difficulties in obtaining an appointment or taking time off from work to attend appointments.⁶⁵ Furthermore, language or literacy issues and lack of translation resources at local offices may also be barriers that prevent certain racial and ethnic groups, particularly Asian and Pacific Islanders, from accessing services needed to maintain benefits.⁶⁶

COVID-19 and the Emergency Food System

Food pantries and soup kitchens play a crucial role in meeting food needs for individuals and families, including populations that are not eligible for federal assistance.^{67,68} According to a 2020 [report](#) released by Food Bank for New York City, the average number of people served at emergency food providers doubled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to an average of 4,050 people served in April 2020.⁶⁹

Many food pantries and soup kitchens had to decrease their hours of operation or shut down their operations entirely due to food and staff shortages, making emergency food assistance more difficult to access in many communities.^{70,71} Only 20 to 35 percent of food pantries in the City were confirmed open between April and mid-May 2020.⁷² Emergency food providers were not able to keep operations running due to decreasing food supplies and lack of volunteers and staff.⁷³ Neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19, which were mostly underserved communities, had lower percentages of open food pantries than other New York City communities.⁷⁴

Even before the pandemic, the emergency food network in the City was overwhelmed. In a 2018 [report](#) published by Food Bank for New York City, 70 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens reported serving New Yorkers from more than one borough, and nearly half served New Yorkers from more than two boroughs aside from their own.⁷⁵ A 2019 [study](#) of food pantries in the Bronx published in the *Journal of Community Health* showed that access to food was unreliable:

...food pantries were not reliably open when—or in some cases even where—they were supposed to be. Pantries

closed (temporarily or permanently) and changed their hours unpredictably, often without signage. When pantries were open, they did not reliably have food on hand to distribute.⁷⁶

Half of all surveyed pantry locations were not open during their scheduled hours, and many pantries lacked sufficient food to meet demand.⁷⁷ Pantries often provided pre-filled grocery bags that limited food variety and choices, and supplies frequently ran out within one hour of opening.⁷⁸

Many people are reluctant to stand in line at a food pantry due to the stigma associated with receiving help.⁷⁹ According to a 2016 [study](#) published in the *Journal of Family and Community Health*:

...participants mentioned feeling ‘embarrassed,’ ‘ashamed,’ or ‘humbled’ when they first started using food pantries. Others commented on how the stigma related to pantry use might be keeping others away... [A participant] commented that “people would rather go hungry.”⁸⁰

Other barriers to accessing food at emergency food providers include discomfort of waiting in extreme weather conditions for several hours and the inability to social distance while waiting in line.⁸¹ Receiving food from food pantries can be especially difficult for parents with young children; according to a community member interviewed by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center for the NY Food 20/20 report, “[the pantry]... always told me, ‘No children, you can’t bring children, just parents can come.’”⁸² For people in need of food assistance, receiving food should feel dignified, not burdensome.



Nutrition Incentive Programs

The USDA defines nutrition incentive programs as programs that “increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables...by providing incentives at the point of purchase.”⁸³ These types of programs are designed to increase access to food, especially fruits and vegetables, for underserved individuals by providing recipients with more purchasing power to use on produce.^{84,85} Nutrition incentive programs have historically been funded by federal or state governments, healthcare companies, and private entities.⁸⁶

[Examples](#) of incentive programs available in the City include:⁸⁷

- **Health Bucks** are \$2 coupons sponsored by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene that can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at all farmers’ markets in the City. Health Bucks are administered as a SNAP incentive at farmers’ markets. For every \$2 spent using their SNAP/EBT card, shoppers receive \$2 in Health Bucks, capped at \$10 per day. Community organizations can also apply to receive free Health Bucks to distribute to community members as an incentive to participate in nutrition education and other health-related activities.
- **Get the Good Stuff** is a program that operates in six participating supermarkets in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn.⁸⁸ New Yorkers can sign up at participating supermarkets, and for every dollar spent using SNAP on eligible fruits, vegetables, and beans—whether fresh, canned, or dried—participants receive a matching dollar (up to \$10 per day) loaded onto a debit card that can be used the next time they purchase eligible items.⁸⁹

- **Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)** is a federal program that provides checks for the purchase of locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables at [participating farm stands and farmers’ markets](#).^{90,91} These checks are available to older adults through the [Commodity Supplemental Food Program \(CSFP\)](#) and to low-income women who have been certified to receive WIC benefits for themselves and their children.⁹²

Unlike emergency food relief programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens, nutrition incentive programs provide participants the freedom and autonomy to purchase their own food, which can lead to sustained healthier food purchasing habits.^{93,94,95,96,97} While nutrition incentive programs are an important and impactful component of promoting nutritional security for all New Yorkers, these programs have limitations. In most existing nutrition incentive programs, the coupons or vouchers provided to participants can only be used at farmers’ markets,⁹⁸ which is a barrier to participants who do not live near a market.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the majority of farmers’ markets (88 percent) in the City close during the winter months, giving incentive program participants even fewer opportunities to purchase fruits and vegetables.¹⁰⁰

Many existing nutrition incentive programs are limited to fruit and vegetable purchases, and therefore cannot be used for all types of household food expenses.^{101,102} Additionally, many incentives are exclusively available to SNAP recipients, which excludes many people who are ineligible for or not enrolled in SNAP but might still be experiencing food hardship.^{103,104} These barriers, compounded with a lack of supermarket-based nutrition incentives, limit the potential impact of incentives for low income families and individuals in the City.





The Program: Food Vouchers

The Program: Food Vouchers

[Meals for Good, Inc.](#) (MFG) is a small non-profit that works to increase access to local and regional fresh food for people living in the City who face food insecurity. Initial MFG programs included partnerships with restaurants that donated up to one dollar for menu items to underfunded food pantries to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables.¹⁰⁵ Under a grant from the Robin Hood Foundation, MFG pivoted their response to the COVID-19 pandemic by expanding their reach to community groups that serve specific populations in need, namely immigrants and victims of domestic violence. The grant was used to pilot a novel retail food establishment-based food voucher and gift card program to address a critical need for food assistance in communities greatly impacted by COVID-19. Through this pilot program, MFG sought to provide people with immediate food purchasing power and the flexibility to choose their own food from supermarkets, grocery stores, and bodegas they trust, while

simultaneously minimizing the burden on food pantries to meet the increased need for food assistance.

To maximize the potential benefit on communities in greatest need, MFG chose two areas they had already been working in: East Harlem and the South Bronx, both predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods that face high rates of poverty and food insecurity.¹⁰⁶ The median household income in East Harlem (\$32,960) was 53 percent less than the citywide median household income (\$70,590).¹⁰⁷ In the South Bronx, the median household income (\$25,500) was 64 percent less than citywide.¹⁰⁸ Although poverty rates are higher in these communities than across the City, less than one-third of households in East Harlem¹⁰⁹ and less than half of households in the South Bronx¹¹⁰ received SNAP benefits in 2019.



Approach

MFG printed vouchers (Figure 2a) and created gift cards (Figure 2b) that were distributed to residents of these communities (“MFG Participants”) in June and July 2021. To distribute the vouchers and gift cards, MFG partnered with long-standing community organizations that offered essential services to underserved community members, many of whom were undocumented non-citizens. To avoid any mistrust or concern that using the vouchers or gift cards would identify people, MFG Participants were asked to provide limited demographic information, including their country of origin and the number of adults and children in each household.

In East Harlem, the vouchers were distributed through three community organizations: [Boriken Neighborhood Health Center](#), [Union Settlement](#), and [Violence Intervention Program](#). The vouchers were printed in English and Spanish and provided in \$10

denominations; families received \$70 and single individuals received \$40. To avoid forgeries, the vouchers were printed on defense paper with a watermark on the back that could not be reprinted and would smudge if copied on most copy machines. Participating organizations reported ease in distributing vouchers to participants. MFG partnered with two nearby supermarkets in East Harlem that agreed to collect vouchers and be reimbursed weekly for the vouchers that were used: Fine Fare on 105th and Third Avenue and Foodtown on 121st and Third Avenue. MFG Participants could use these vouchers to purchase [SNAP-eligible items](#). Vouchers could not be used to purchase hot or prepared foods, alcoholic beverages, supplements, and non-food items. The use of SNAP eligibility for items purchased with the vouchers minimized the burden on store cashiers in following the program. Unused vouchers were given to supermarket employees. Supermarket

managers trained their cashiers prior to the start of the program, including how to print a second receipt and staple it to the vouchers as they were used and how to spot a counterfeit voucher. The second receipt stapled to the voucher was then returned weekly to MFG for analysis.

Yorkers in the Community Health Survey).¹¹² Therefore, MFG did not partner with any specific supermarkets in the South Bronx. To include MFG Participants located in the South Bronx in the program, MFG issued special gift cards that said “For Food Only, Use at Supermarkets” (Figure 2) to be distributed to community members by the Safe Passage Project. MFG Participants who used these gift cards were asked to deposit their receipts in a safe drop box located at the Safe Passage Project’s physical address in the South Bronx. These receipts were then given weekly to MFG for analysis.

MFG distributed \$20,000 worth of vouchers in East Harlem and \$4,000 in gift cards in the South Bronx. More than half (53 percent) of MFG Participants who received vouchers used their vouchers in one shopping trip. In contrast, the gift cards were mainly used to purchase foods over multiple shopping trips (65 percent). One possible reason for this difference is that the gift cards were not earmarked for any specific supermarkets, which may be explained by the fact that gift cards could be used at any nearby supermarket or bodega, giving MFG Participants in the South Bronx greater flexibility in when and where the money was spent.

Figure 2b. MFG Special Gift Cards



In the South Bronx, where large supermarkets are sparse,¹¹¹ customized MFG gift cards were distributed through the Safe Passage Project, a local community organization. Among MFG Participants recruited by the [Safe Passage Project](#), no supermarket was within walking distance (10 minutes or less, according to City reporting on nutritional indicators of healthy living among adult New

Figure 2a. MFG Printed Vouchers



The Data: Findings

Participants

- 325 households of varying backgrounds participated in the program.
 - These households comprised a total of 1,324 participants – 696 adults and 628 children.
 - 81 (25 percent) of these households were one-person households.
 - 50 individuals of the one-person households were older adults (≥60 years old).
 - 31 individuals of the one-person households were between the ages of 17-24.
- MFG Participants were asked to provide one element of their demographic data upon receipt of the vouchers/gift cards: “Country of Origin.” Table 2 shows the MFG Participants’ stated countries of origin.



Table 2. MFG Participants’ Stated Country of Origin	
South Bronx	
Country	Number of Participants (% of South Bronx participants)
Ecuador	8 (6 percent)
El Salvador	19 (13 percent)
Guatemala	26 (18 percent)
Guyana	1 (less than 1 percent)
Honduras	82 (57 percent)
Jamaica	1 (less than 1 percent)
Mexico	1 (less than 1 percent)
Venezuela	1 (less than 1 percent)
China	1 (less than 1 percent)
Guinea	4 (3 percent)
East Harlem	
Country	Number of Participants (% of East Harlem participants)
Puerto Rico	67 (8 percent)
United States of America*	247 (29 percent)
Dominican Republic	66 (8 percent)
Ecuador	9 (1 percent)
Guatemala	24 (3 percent)
Honduras	13 (2 percent)
Mexico	346 (40 percent)
China	38 (4 percent)
Philippines	4 (less than 1 percent)
Guinea	7 (1 percent)
Mali	9 (1 percent)
Mauritania	5 (less than 1 percent)
Senegal	24 (3 percent)
* Some MFG Participants answered “African American.” They have been included in this category.	



Grocery Receipts

Food Categories

The grocery receipts (“MFG receipt data”) from the vouchers and gift cards were indexed into Major Food Categories, and then further organized into Food Subcategories (Table 3). Items that were unable to be identified on receipts (154 items, or 3.7 percent of purchases) and non-food items that appeared on receipts (but were not purchased using voucher or gift card funds) have been omitted from analysis. In total, 3,921 food items were purchased and included in the analysis, with an average of nine food items per purchase, per receipt. MFG Participants spent a total of \$20,115.09, with an average of \$45.92 spent per receipt. Ninety-two (92) percent of vouchers were redeemed and 100 percent of gift cards were redeemed.

Table 3. MFG Receipt Data Categories

Major Food Category	Food Subcategories
Produce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh Fruits • Fresh Vegetables
Other Fruits and Vegetables, and Legumes (Other F/V)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frozen Fruits and Vegetables • Dried Fruits and Vegetables • Canned Fruits and Vegetables • Dried and Canned Beans
Meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh, Frozen, Cooked and Canned Meat • Poultry • Fish • Processed Meat and Sausages and Deli Meat • Miscellaneous Meat Products (i.e. chicken stock, spam)
Drinks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water • Coffee and Tea • Juice • Non-Juice Fruit Drinks • Soda • Miscellaneous Drinks (i.e. Malta, nutritional shakes)
Snacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared and Packaged Cakes and Pastries • Applesauce and Pudding • Ice Cream • Fruit Snacks and Granola • Cookies • Candy and Chocolate • Chips and Other Snacks (i.e. crackers, popcorn, pretzels)
Pantry Staples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oil and Vinegar • Seasonings • Baking Needs (i.e. flour, baking powder) • Condiments and Sauces (i.e. pickles, ketchup, salad dressing) • Nuts • Spreads • Eggs
Grains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hot and Cold Cereals (i.e. rolled oats, corn flakes) • Bread (i.e. pre-sliced bread, rolls, tortillas) • Dry Pasta (i.e. rotini, linguine) • Pasta Products (i.e. Kraft mac & cheese) • Rice Products (i.e. dry jasmine and long grain rice) • Canned and Packaged Noodles and Soups
Dairy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yogurt and Yogurt Products • Milk, Milk Products (i.e. creamer), and Milk Alternatives (i.e. coconut milk, soy beverage) • Cheeses
Miscellaneous (Misc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frozen Meals (i.e. frozen pizza, frozen waffles) • Baby Food

Dollars Spent and Items Purchased

We present the MFG receipt data in two ways: **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) shows the amount of dollars spent within each Major Food Category by all MFG Participants and **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) shows the total number of food items purchased within each Major Food Category. This allows us to compare the amount of money spent on food products with how many of those products were purchased.

*Please note: different food items have different relative costs. For example, at Foodtown in East Harlem, a mango costs \$1.25, whereas a package of Oscar Meyer bacon costs \$7.99.¹¹³ So it's clear that when you calculate Total Dollars Spent, food items in the meat category will be higher than food items in the fresh produce category, for instance. That is why we included **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** in addition to **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** in the analysis.*

I. Summary (All Categories)

- Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) shows that MFG Participants spent the majority of the voucher/gift card funds on meat (26.7 percent of total food dollars spent), fresh produce (15.6 percent of total food dollars spent), and pantry staples (14.1 percent of total food dollars spent) (note: pantry staples include items such as oil/vinegar, eggs, seasonings, and baking needs). However, **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) shows that MFG Participants purchased more fresh produce items than they did meat items (23 percent of total

items purchased compared to 15.3 percent of total items purchased, respectively).

- Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) shows that MFG Participants spent nearly 5 times as much voucher/gift card funds on pantry staples than they did on miscellaneous items (14.1 percent of total food dollars spent compared to 2.9 percent of total food dollars spent, respectively).
- Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) shows that MFG Participants spent only 9.9 percent of voucher/gift card funds on snack items (such as chips, pastries, ice cream, and candy).
- Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) shows that miscellaneous items (including frozen meals, entrees and sides) were purchased the least often of all food items, making up 2.1 percent of total items purchased.
- Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) shows that MFG Participants purchased fresh produce nearly six times more often than they did frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables (23 percent of total items purchased compared to 3.7 percent of total items purchased, respectively).

Figure 3a. Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants

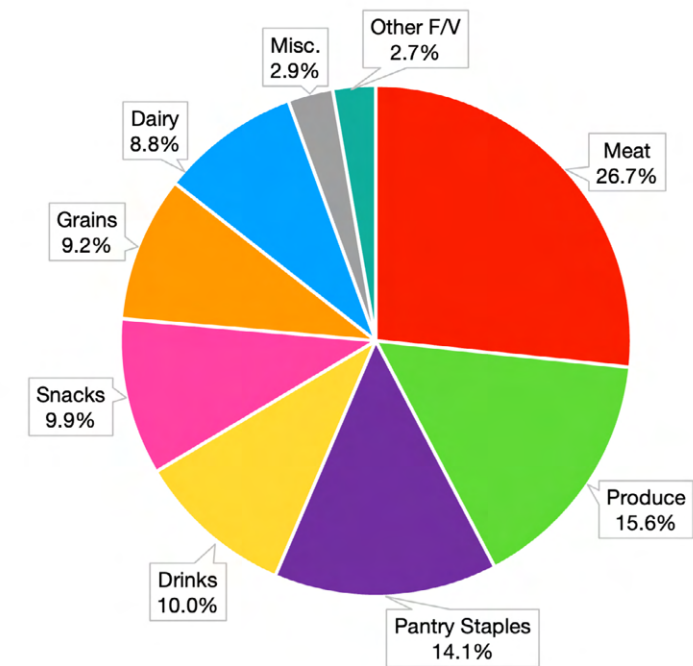
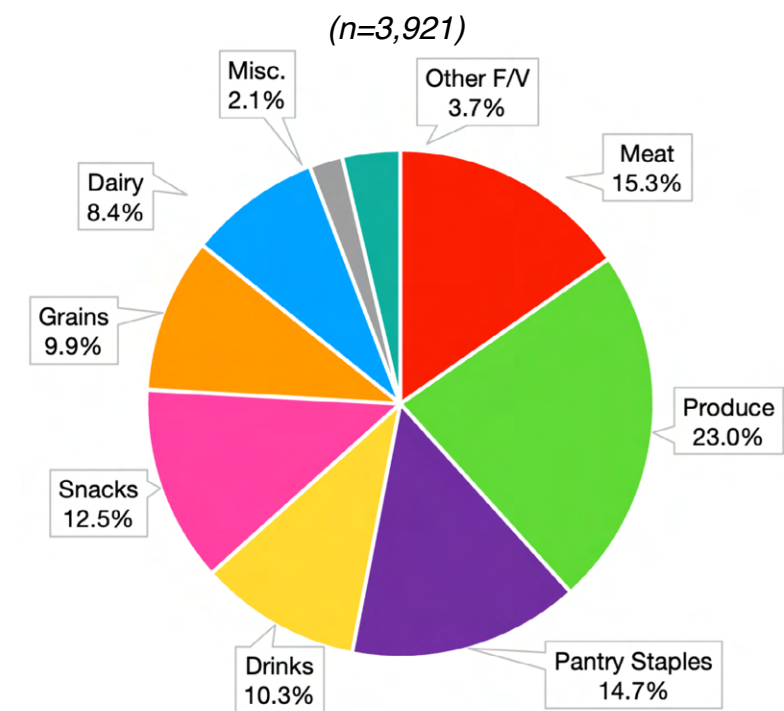


Figure 3b. Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants





II. Fresh Produce

- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on fresh produce is 15.6 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of fresh produce is 23 percent of all items purchased.
- Of the **Total Dollars Spent on Fresh Produce** (Figure 4a), MFG Participants spent 50.8 percent of those dollars spent on produce on fresh fruits and 49.2 percent of the dollars spent on produce on fresh vegetables – nearly equal amounts.
- However, **Total Produce Items Purchased** (Figure 4b) shows that MFG Participants purchased more vegetable items (60.7 percent of produce items purchased) than fruit items (39.3 percent of produce items purchased).
- Citrus and tropical fruits (such as oranges, pineapple and mango) made up one-third (33 percent) of all fruit purchases. Watermelon and berries together made up one-quarter (25.4 percent) of all fruit purchases.
- Vegetables most often purchased included fruit vegetables such as tomatoes and avocados (23.5 percent), alliums, such as onions and garlic (11.6 percent), leafy greens, such as romaine lettuce, kale and spinach (10.6 percent), tubers, such as potatoes and yuca (9.3 percent) and herbs, such as cilantro and thyme (4 percent).

Figure 4a. Total Dollars Spent on Fresh Produce

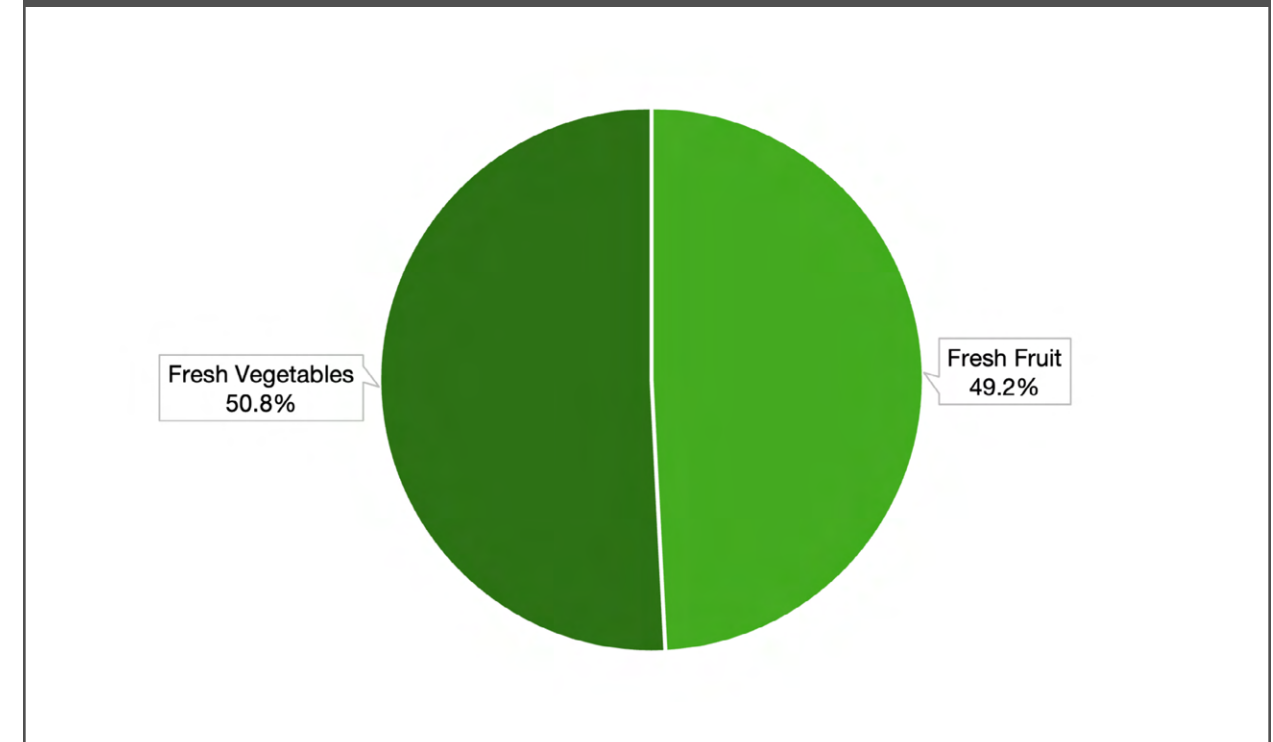
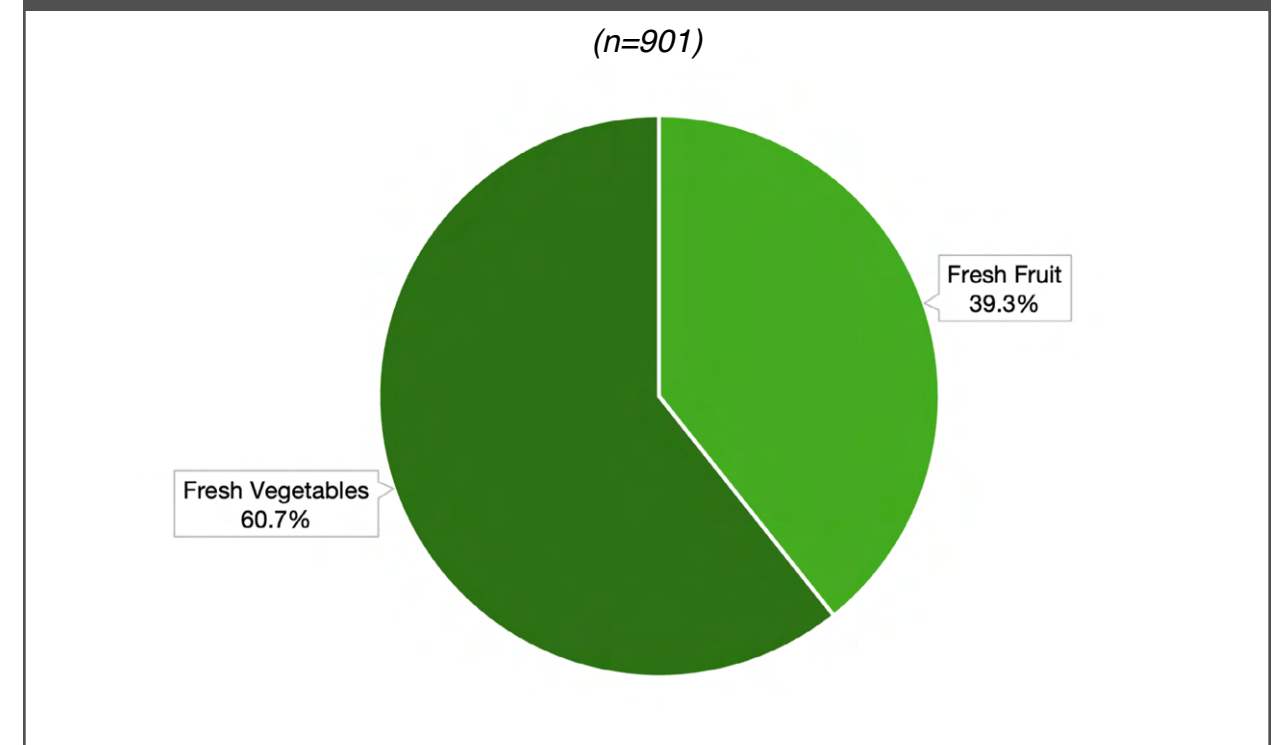


Figure 4b. Total Fresh Produce Items Purchased



III. Meat

- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on meat is 26.7 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of meat is 15.3 percent of all items purchased.
- **Total Dollars Spent on Meat** (Figure 5a) shows that most of the voucher/gift card funds spent on meat was used to purchase beef (22.7 percent of the dollars spent on meat), poultry (20.7 percent of the dollars spent on Meat), and pork (20.4 percent of the dollars spent on meat).
- **Total Meat Items Purchased** (Figure 5b) shows that poultry, such as chicken and turkey, was purchased the most often of all meat items (25.5 percent of meat items purchased).
- **Total Dollars Spent on Meat** (Figure 5a) shows that MFG Participants spent more than five times as much voucher/gift card funds on red meat (beef and pork) and poultry, including whole cuts of fresh and ground meat, as they did on processed meat items (64 percent of the dollars spent on meat, compared to 11.1 percent of the dollars spent on meat, respectively).
- **Total Meat Items Purchased** (Figure 5b) shows that more processed meat items (11.3 percent of meat items purchased) were purchased than fish items (16.6 percent of meat items purchased, respectively).



Figure 5a. Total Dollars Spent on Meat

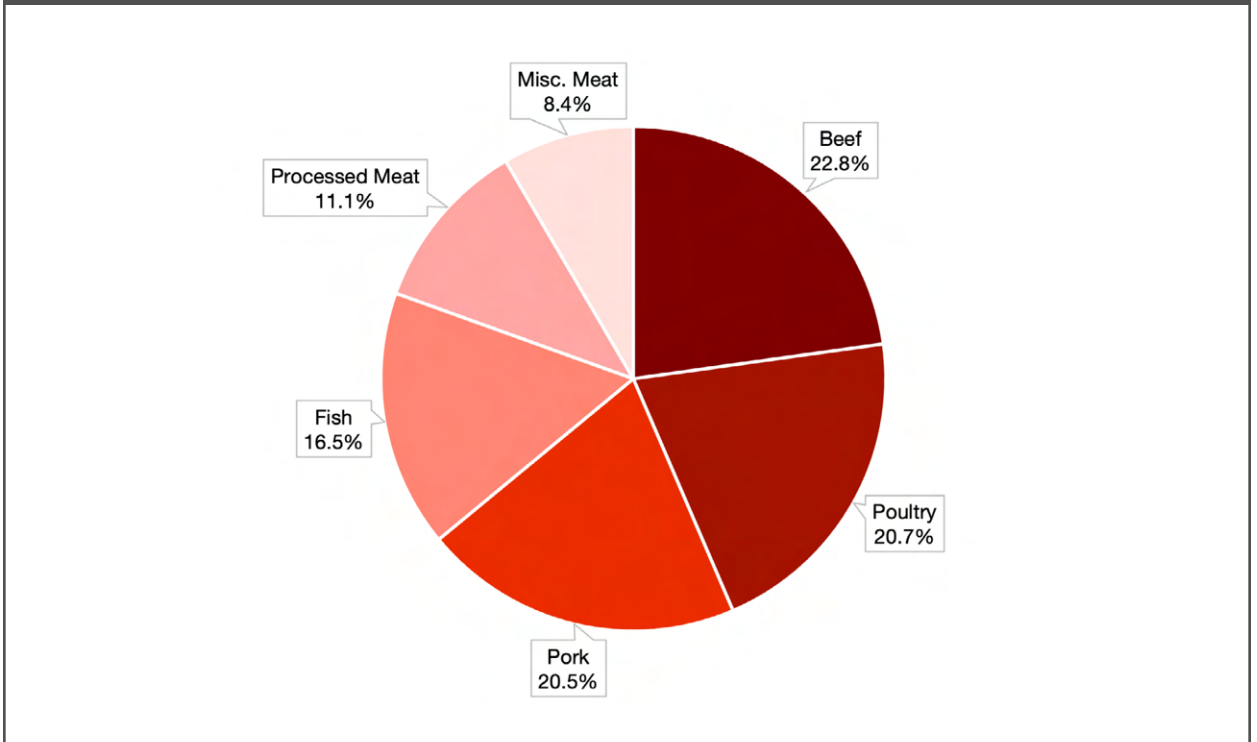
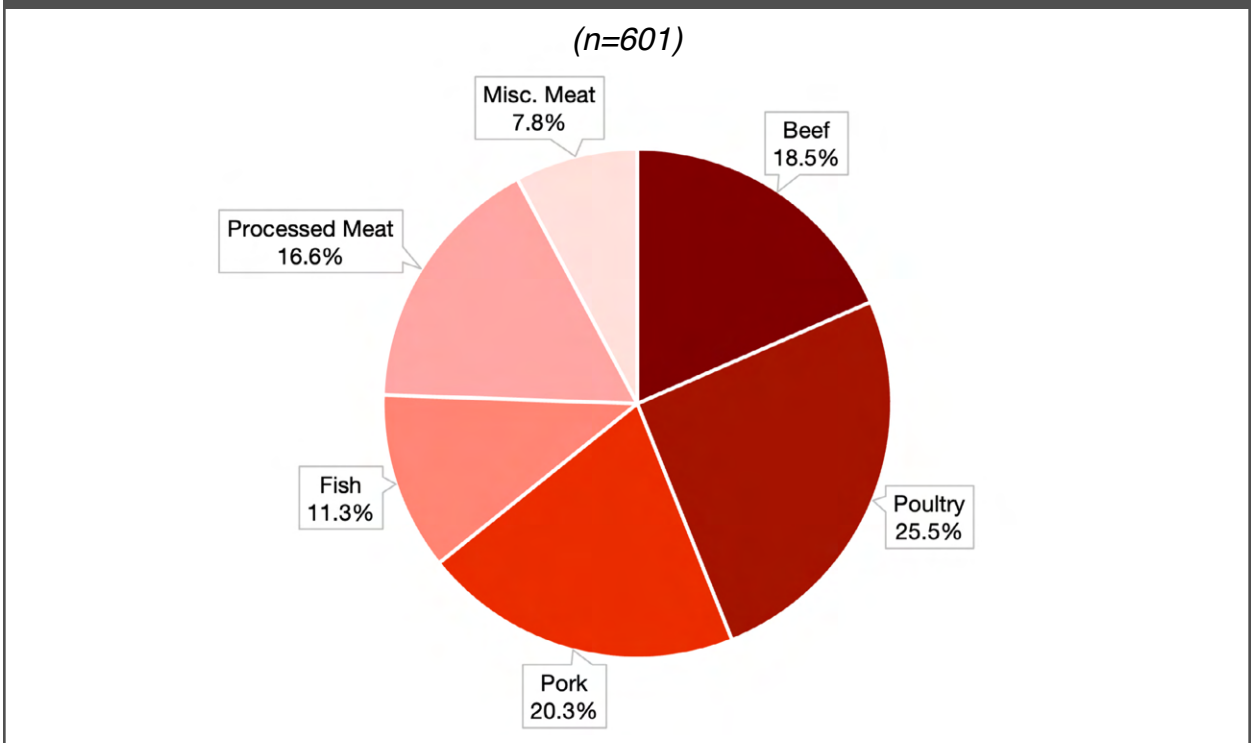


Figure 5b. Total Meat Items Purchased





IV. Pantry Staples

- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on pantry staples is 14.1 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of pantry staples is 14.7 percent of all items purchased.
- **Total Dollars Spent on Pantry Staples** (Figure 6a) shows that within the pantry staples category, MFG Participants spent the most voucher/gift card funds on condiments and sauces (24.9 percent of the dollars spent on pantry staples).
- **Total Dollars Spent on Pantry Staples** (Figure 6a) shows that more than half of the voucher/gift card funds spent on pantry staples was used to purchase food items used in scratch cooking, including oil and vinegar (23.3 percent of the dollars spent on Pantry Staples), seasonings (13.4 percent of the dollars spent on pantry staples), eggs (12.5 percent of the dollars spent on pantry staples), and baking needs (11 percent of the dollars spent on pantry staples).
- **Total Pantry Staple Items Purchased** (Figure 6b) shows that MFG Participants purchased nuts the least often of all pantry staples (3.4 percent of the dollars spent on pantry staples).

Figure 6a. Total Dollars Spent on Pantry Staples

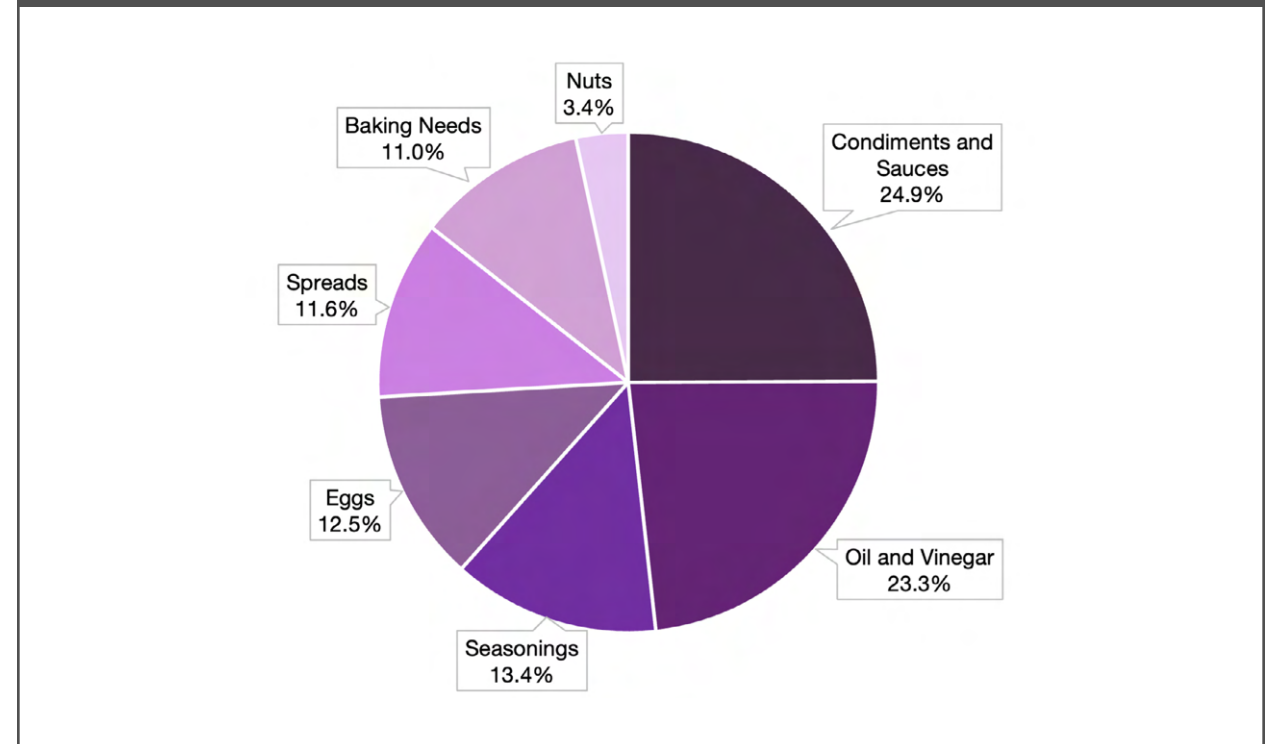
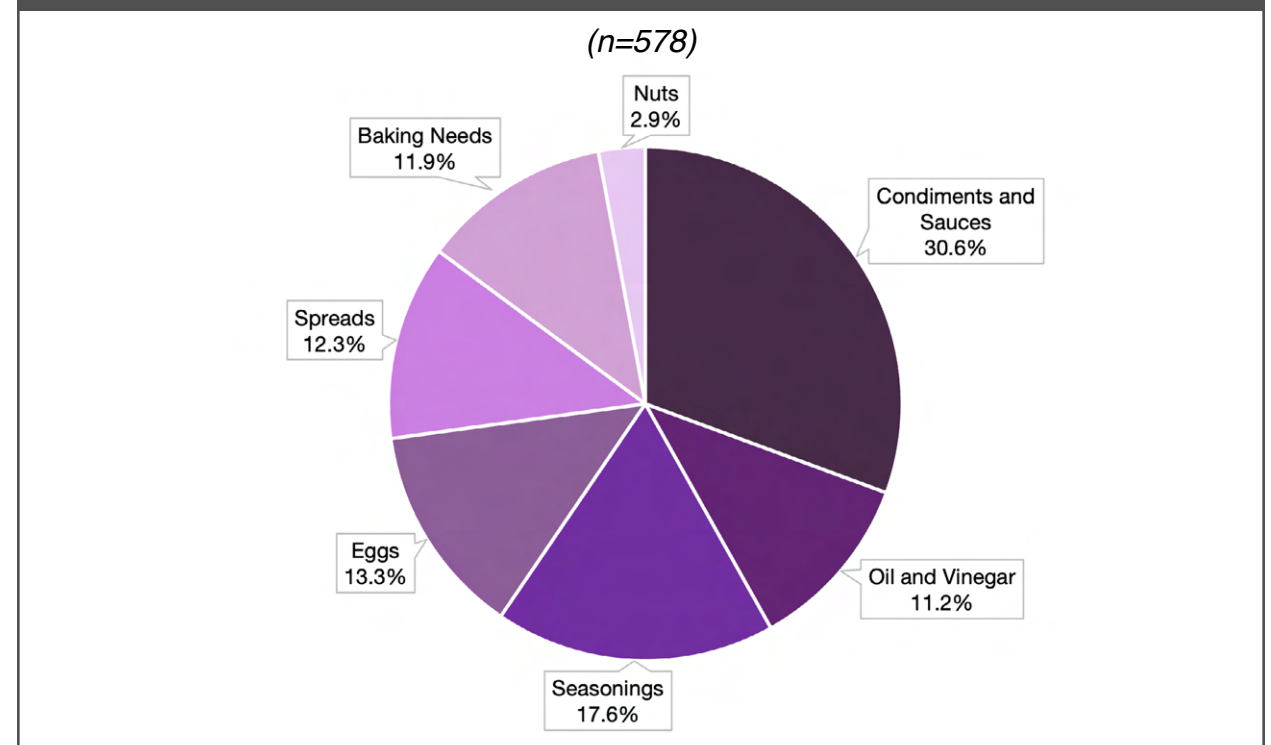


Figure 6b. Total Pantry Staple Items Purchased





V. Grains

- Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on grains is 9.2 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of grains is 9.9 percent of all items purchased.
- Total Dollars Spent on Grains** (Figure 7a) shows that MFG Participants spent more voucher/gift card funds on rice products (24.2 percent of the dollars spent on grains) and cold cereal (24 percent of the dollars spent on grains) than they did on bread products (21.9 percent of the dollars spent on grains) and dry pasta (7.9 percent of the dollars spent on grains).
- Total Grains Items Purchased** (Figure 7b) shows that bread products (28.9 percent of grains items purchased), cold cereal (22.2 percent of grains items purchased), dry pasta (14 percent of grains items purchased) and rice products (12.1 percent of grains items purchased) were bought the most often of all grains purchases by MFG Participants.

Figure 7a. Total Dollars Spent on Grains

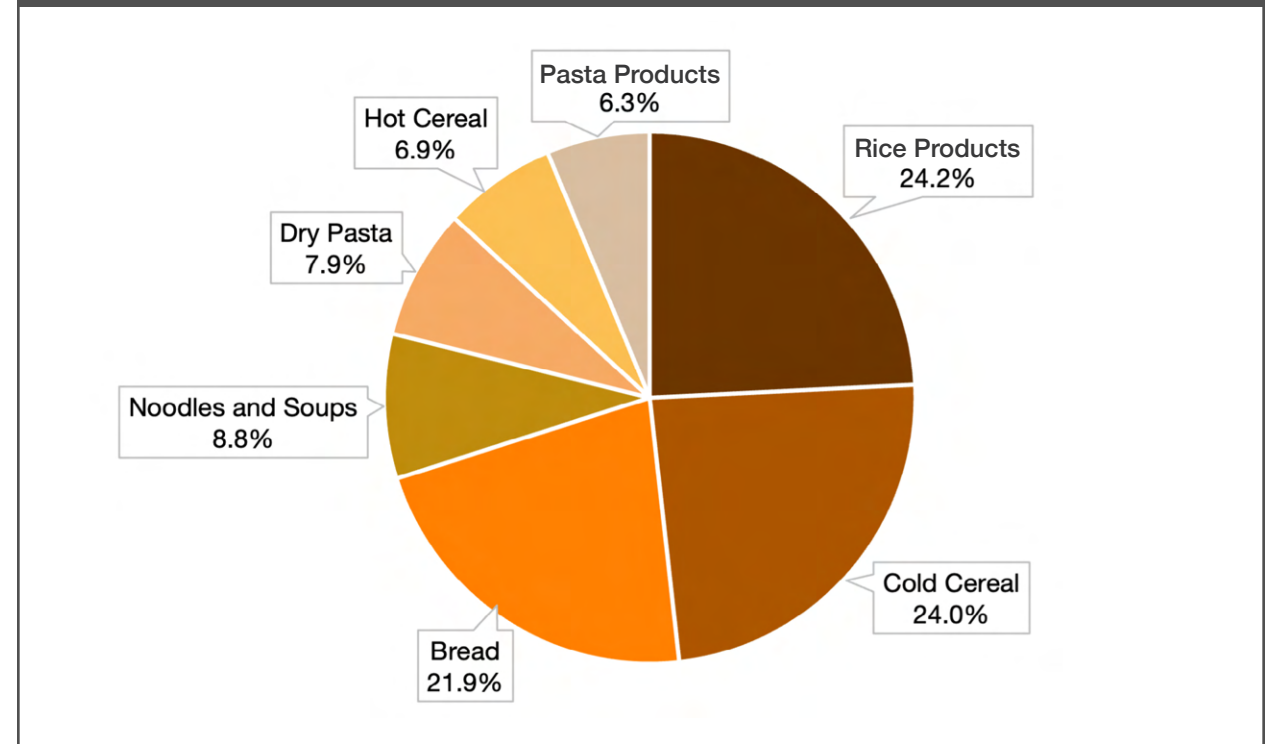
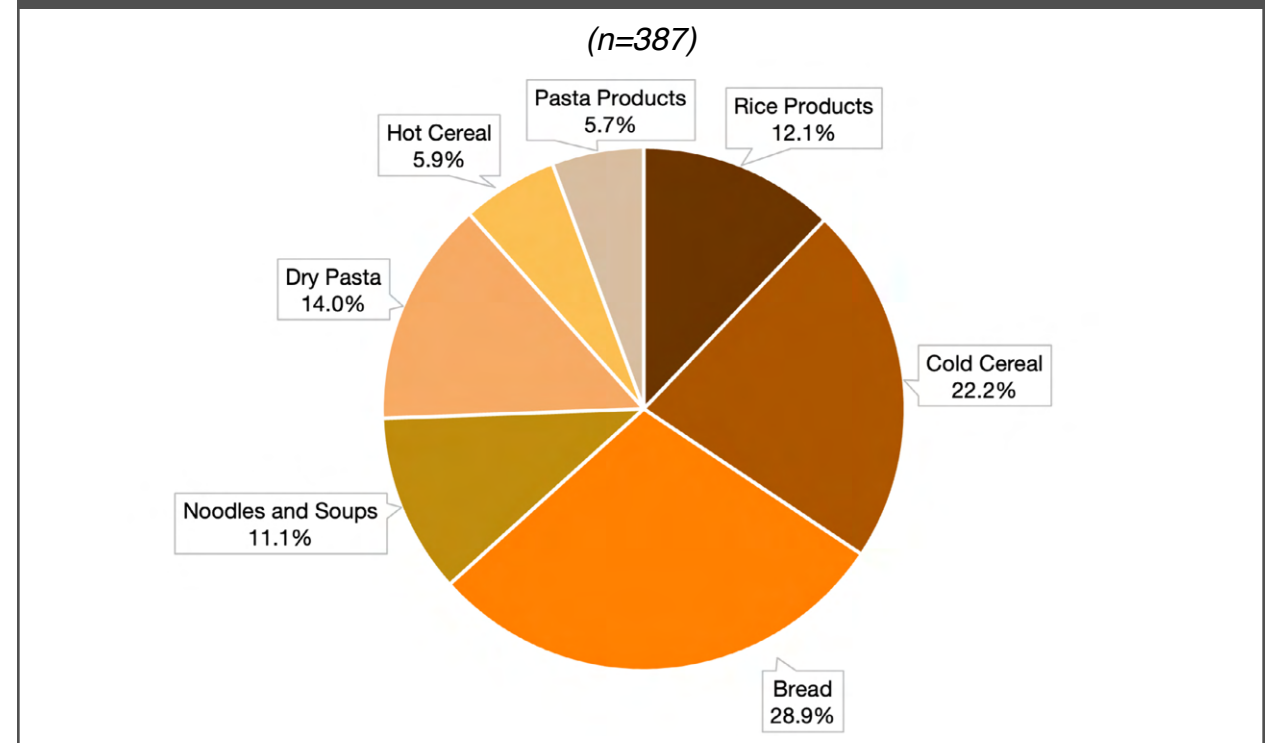


Figure 7b. Total Grains Items Purchased



VI. Dairy, Snacks, Drinks, and Miscellaneous

- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on dairy is 8.8 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of dairy is 8.4 percent of all items purchased.
- MFG Participants spent most of their voucher/gift card funds in the dairy category on milk, milk products and milk alternatives and cheese (42.2 percent of the dollars spent on dairy and 41.5 percent of the dollars spent on dairy, respectively), as shown in **Total Dollars Spent on Dairy** (Figure 8a).
- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on snacks is 9.9 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of snacks is 12.5 percent of all items purchased.
- As shown in **Total Dollars Spent on Snacks** (Figure 9a), MFG Participants spent the majority of voucher/gift card funds in the snacks category on chips (29.5 percent of the dollars spent on snacks), ice cream (22.4 percent of the dollars spent on snacks), and cakes and pastries (21.2 percent of the dollars spent on snacks).
- **Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) on drinks is 10 percent of all voucher/gift card funds spent.
- **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) of drinks is 10.3 percent of all items purchased.
- Within the drinks category, 21 percent of drink items purchased were juice and 20.5 percent of drink items purchased were soda – nearly equal amounts, as shown in **Total Drink Items Purchased** (Figure 10b).



Figure 8a. Total Dollars Spent on Dairy

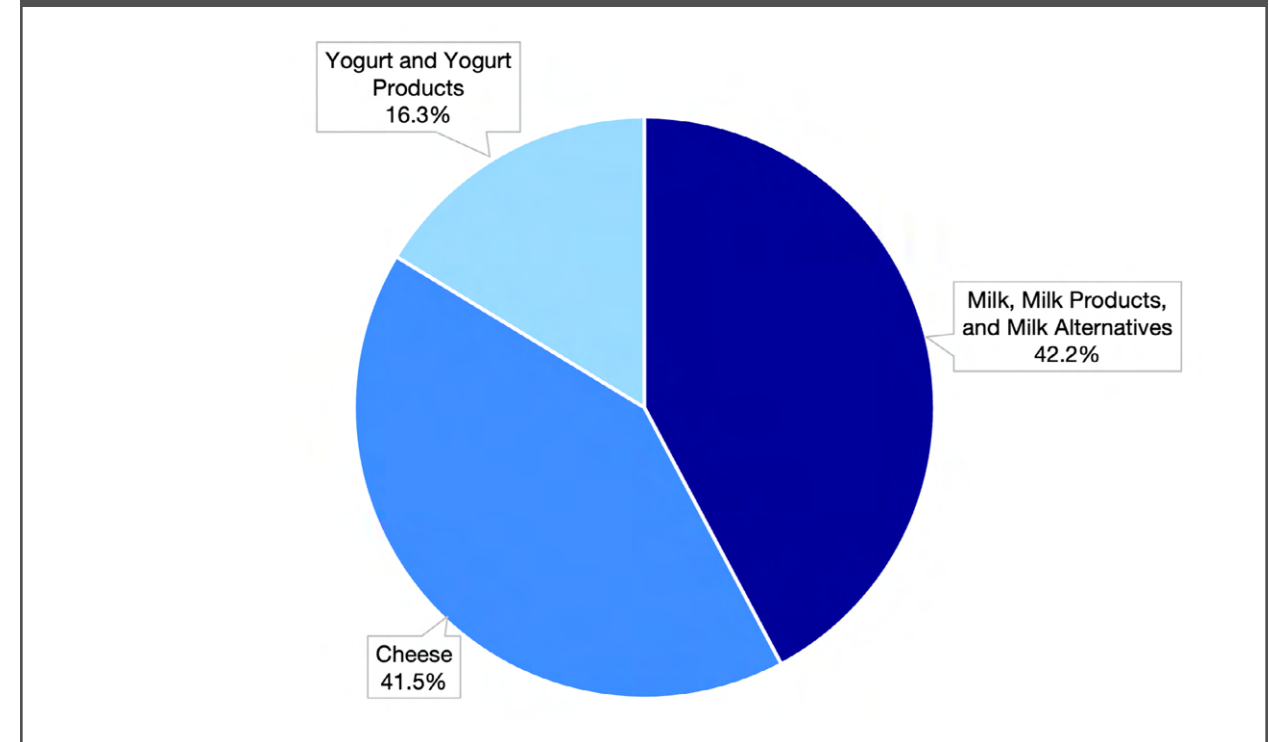


Figure 8b. Total Dairy Items Purchased

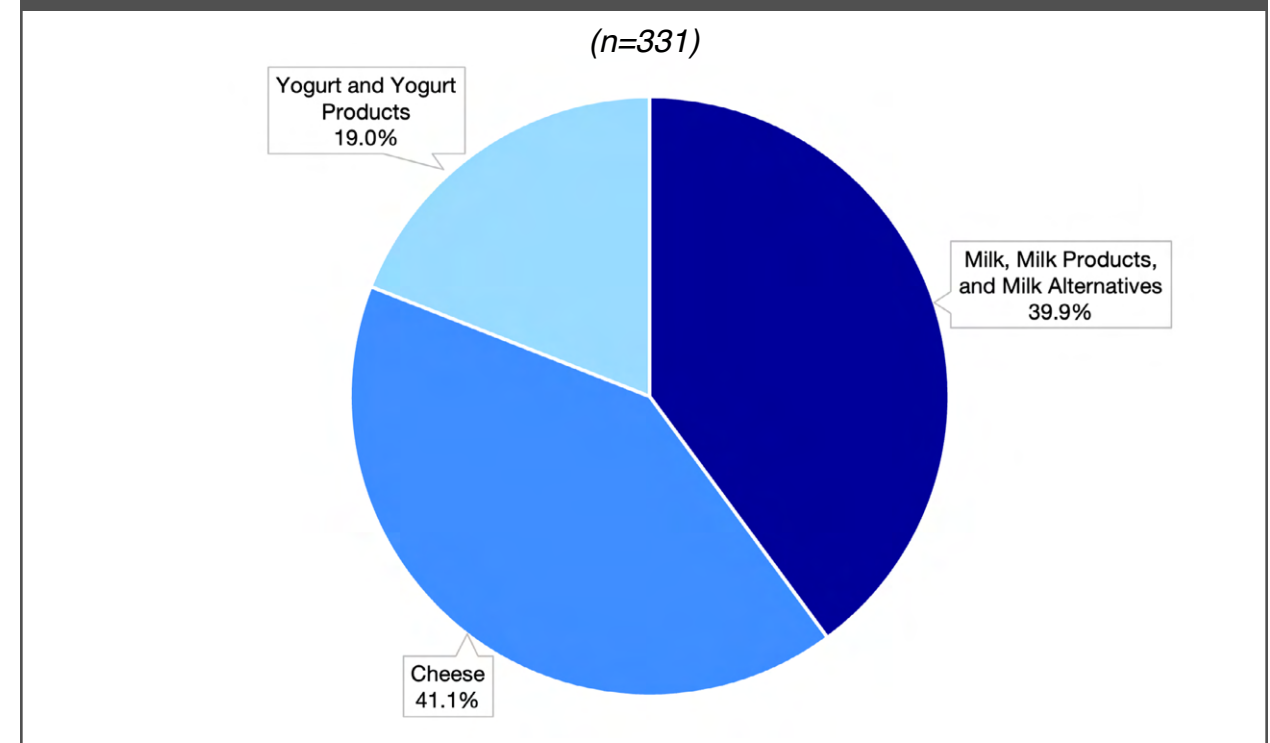


Figure 9a. Total Dollars Spent on Snacks

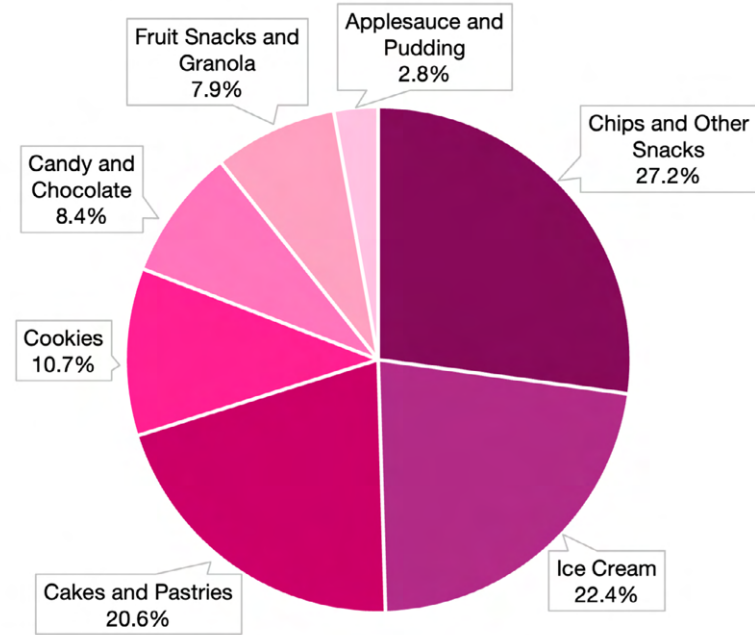


Figure 10a. Total Dollars Spent on Drinks

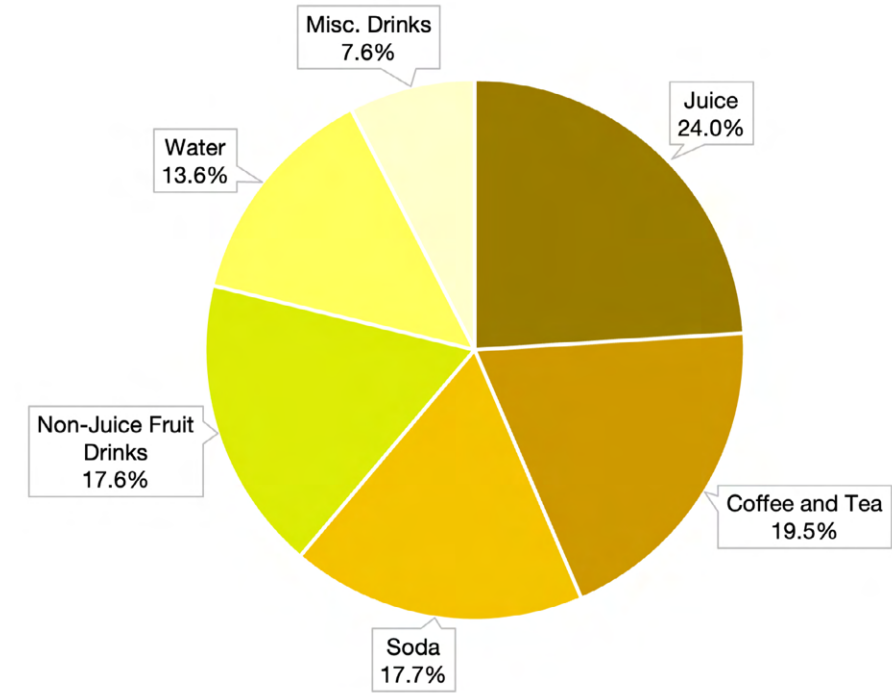


Figure 9b. Total Snack Items Purchased

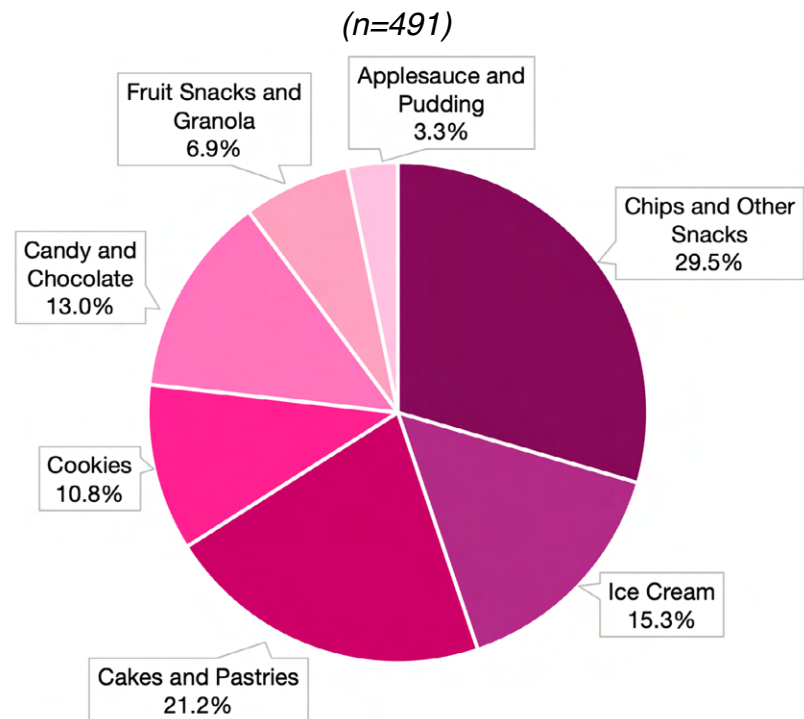
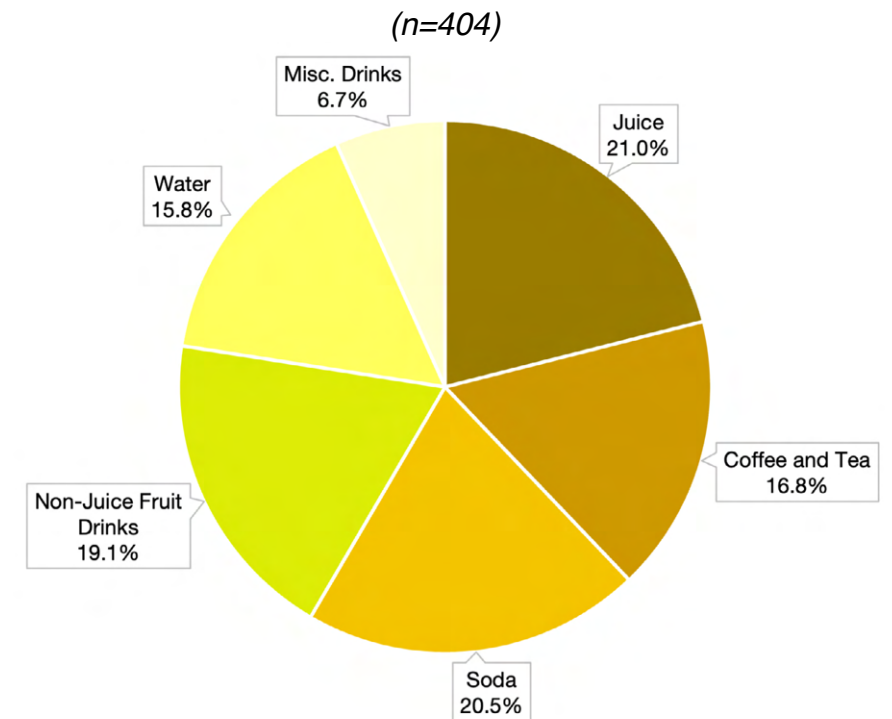


Figure 10b. Total Drink Items Purchased



Comparative Data Analysis

Our comparative data analysis of the MFG receipt data is a comparison to data from the [United States Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Food and Nutrition Services Nutrition Assistance Program Report \(2016\)](#) (“SNAP Data”) and the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2020 Consumer Expenditure Survey](#) (“BLS Data”).

SNAP Data

The SNAP Data comes from receipts of purchases using SNAP benefits at grocery stores, supermarkets, and food and drug stores during the full calendar year of 2011 (the most recent publicly available data), with over 1 billion records of food items purchased per month by 3.2 million households receiving SNAP (“SNAP Households”).¹¹⁴ The SNAP Data was divided into summary categories of purchases and identified as total purchases in millions of dollars as well as percent of total expenditures.¹¹⁵ Demographic data of SNAP Households was not included in the USDA report.

BLS Data

The BLS Data comes from the Consumer Expenditure Survey, which is conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau to provide data on income, spending, and demographic characteristics of U.S. consumers. Data from this survey is meant to represent the food purchasing habits of the average American household.¹¹⁶

In 2020, 131,234 households (“BLS-Surveyed Households”) were surveyed across the country to provide national data on grocery purchases of food and beverages.¹¹⁷ Each BLS-surveyed Household recorded the food

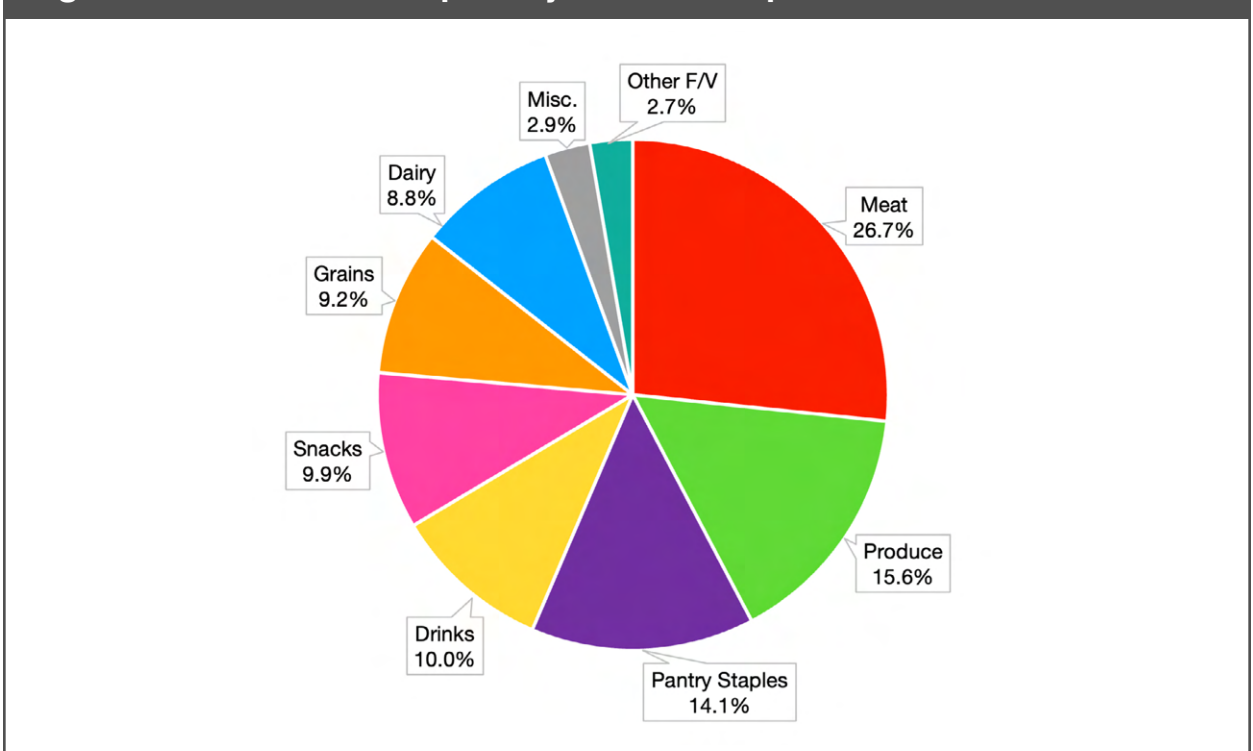
they purchased and their dollar amount in a diary format for two consecutive one-week periods.¹¹⁸ Of the households included in the 2020 nationwide survey, 80 percent identified as white, 13 percent identified as either Black or African American, 5 percent identified as Asian, and 2 percent identified as all other races. The survey population had an average household income of \$84,352 before taxes.¹¹⁹ Comparing the MFG receipt data to BLS Data can help us understand differences in purchasing habits between the MFG Participants and the average American household.

BLS Data detailed the average purchasing for households in 2020.¹²⁰ The BLS Data was broken down into “Food at Home” categories such as Cereals and Bakery Products, with subcategories such as Flour and Rice. While some of the categories in the BLS Data matched the categories we developed for data analysis of the MFG receipt data, not all categories matched. Therefore, we redefined the categories used in the BLS Data according to the categories from our data analysis in order to compare the two datasets (BLS Data and MFG receipt data).

Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants (Figure 3a), duplicated on the following page, shows the MFG receipt data breakdown. **Average Food Expenditures by American Households in 2020** (Figure 11a) shows the BLS Data after redefining those categories, and **Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows the SNAP Data.



Figure 3a. Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants



Similarities, Differences, and Limitations between MFG Receipt Data, BLS Data, and SNAP Data

While it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the MFG receipt data and the SNAP Data or the BLS Data because the three datasets were collected using different methods and at different timepoints, it is nonetheless interesting to note the similarities and differences in purchasing between the three groups.

- Total Dollars Spent by MFG Participants** (Figure 3a) and Average Food Expenditures by American Households in 2020 (Figure 11a) show that both MFG Participants and BLS-Surveyed Households spent most of their money on Fresh Produce, Meat, and Pantry Staples. Similarly to the BLS-Surveyed Households, MFG Participants spent less than one-quarter of their food money on Snacks and Drinks.
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent a similar percentage of money on Meat as BLS-Surveyed Households and MFG Participants (20 percent of total food dollars spent, 20.1 percent of total food dollars spent, and 26.7 percent of total food dollars spent, respectively).
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent the least amount of their food money on Pantry Staples (9.0 percent of total food dollars spent) and Other Fruits and Vegetables (including canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables) (3.9 percent of total food dollars spent).
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent a larger percentage of their total food dollars spent on frozen meals, entrees and side items than did MFG Participants.*
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent a similar percentage of money on Meat as BLS-Surveyed Households and MFG Participants (20 percent of total food dollars spent, 20.1 percent of total food dollars spent, and 26.7 percent of total food dollars spent, respectively).
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent less money on Fresh Produce compared to MFG Participants (9.1 percent of total food dollars spent and 15.6 percent of total food dollars spent, respectively).
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent a larger percentage of their total food dollars spent on canned, frozen or dried fruits and vegetables compared to MFG Participants (4.1 percent of total food dollars spent and 2.7 percent of total food dollars spent, respectively).
- Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011** (Figure 11b) shows that SNAP Households spent a larger percentage of their total food dollars spent on frozen meals, entrees and side items than did MFG Participants.*

Figure 11a. Average Food Expenditures by American Households in 2020

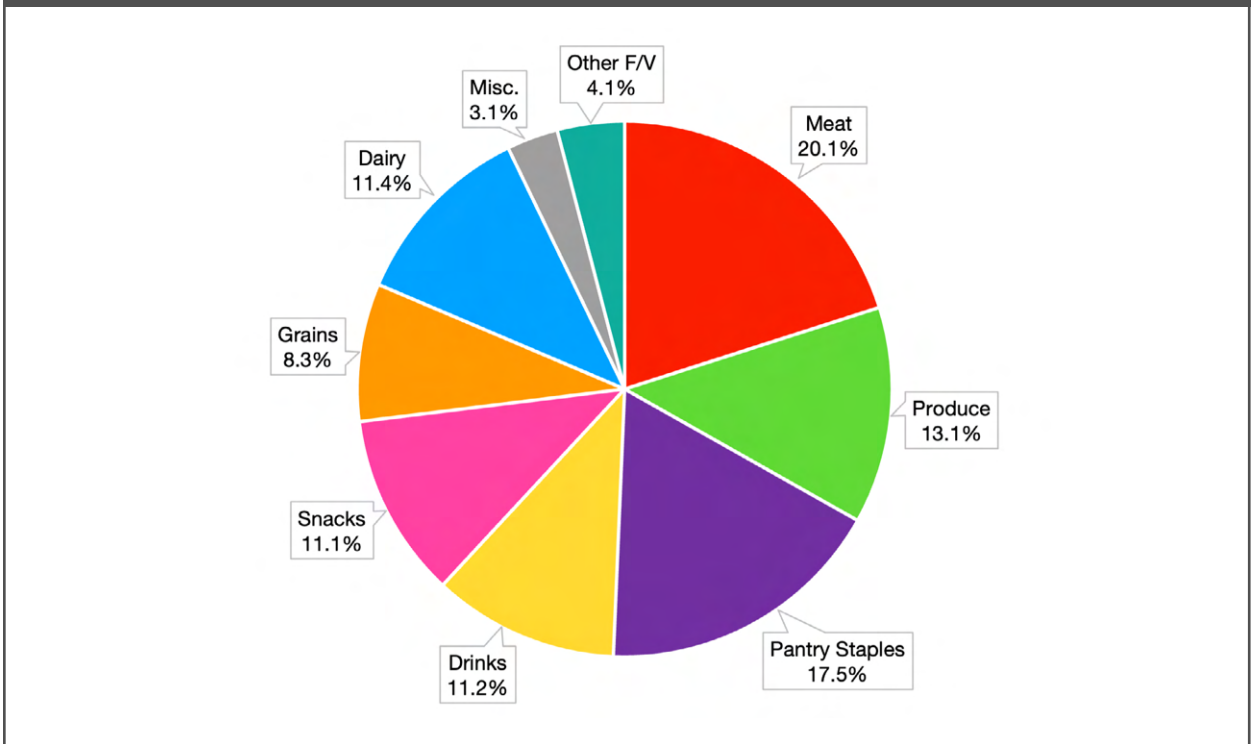
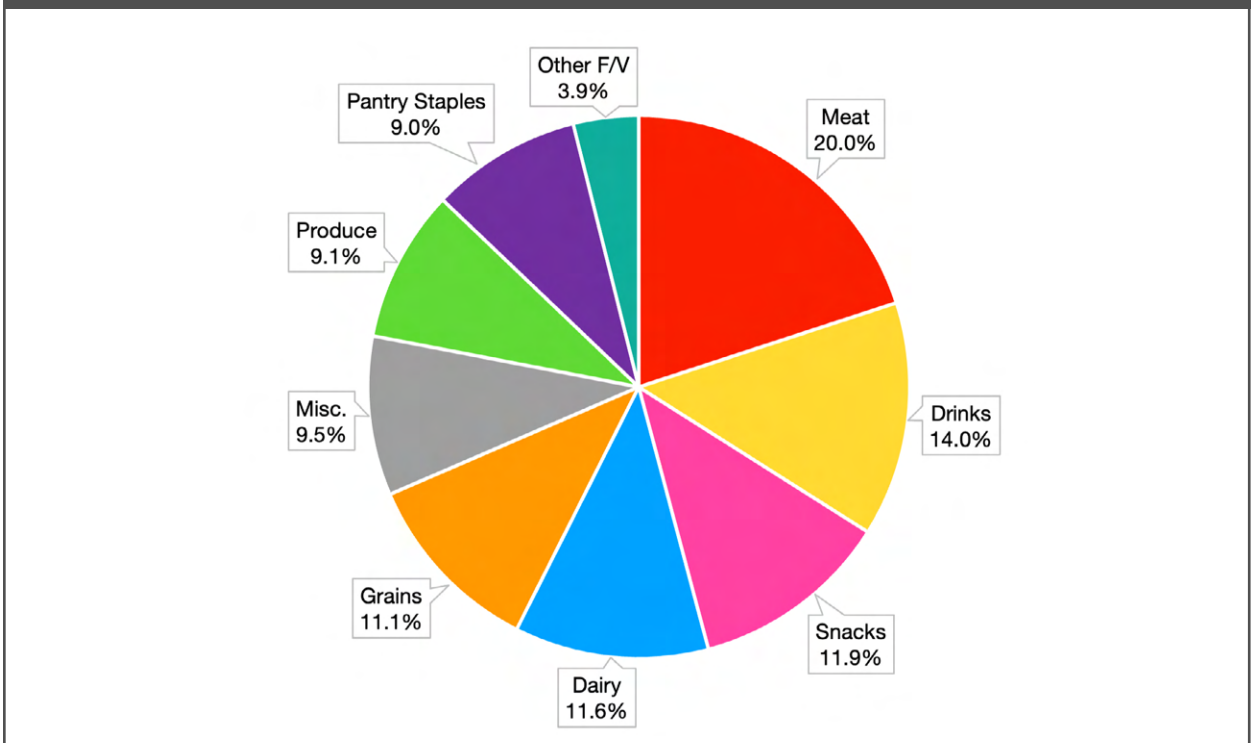


Figure 11b. Total Food Expenditures by SNAP Households in 2011



*This can be extrapolated based on the item categorization methods used in the different datasets. Both datasets categorized frozen pre-made food items as "Miscellaneous", and in both datasets, Miscellaneous items made up about 3 percent of total food dollars spent. However, in the MFG receipt data, Miscellaneous items included both frozen pre-made food items and infant formula. In the BLS Data, Miscellaneous items only included frozen pre-made food items.

Discussion

The analysis of the MFG receipt data revealed that the majority of MFG Participants' purchases were of Meat (26.7 percent), Fresh Produce (15.6 percent) and Pantry Staples (14.1 percent). It was also found that the purchasing habits of MFG Participants closely resembled that of the average American household: respondents to the 2020 Consumer Expenditure Survey mainly bought Meat (20.1 percent of total dollars spent), Pantry Staples (17.5 percent of total dollars spent), and Fresh Produce (13.1 percent of total dollars spent) in 2020.¹²¹

These findings are important in helping to better understand the purchasing habits of voucher recipients and reduce common biases against those who use vouchers and other food assistance programs, including that these populations primarily purchase processed and unhealthy foods.^{122,123}

Fresh Produce

Twenty-three (23) percent of the **Total Items Purchased by MFG Participants** (Figure 3b) were Fresh Produce. This is nearly six times more items than Other Fruits and Vegetables (including frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables), which made up 3.7 percent of total items purchased. This might be due to seasonal variation in retail availability and price of fresh produce. In the Northeast region, many popular fruits and vegetables are “in season” during the summer months,^{124,125,126} and fresh produce that is “in season” typically costs less and is more widely available in supermarkets and grocery stores than fresh produce that is not “in season.”¹²⁷ Since this pilot program took place during the summer of 2021, the availability of fresh produce might

have increased MFG Participants' interest in purchasing these items.

Meat

As shown in **Total Meat Items Purchased** (Figure 5b), 25.5 percent of Meat items purchased were poultry, a lean meat. The reason for this might be due to its relative cost of poultry products compared to other items in the Meat category; at Foodtown in East Harlem, chicken breast costs \$3.19 per pound, whereas a beef skirt steak costs \$19.99 per pound.¹²⁸ Poultry is often recommended as a healthier alternative to red meat, which might have influenced some MFG Participants' decisions.¹²⁹ Furthermore, there might be cultural motivations to selecting poultry over red meat, as the nutritional guidelines from many countries around the globe recommend people consume more poultry than red meat.¹³⁰

Of the **Total Dollars Spent on Meat** (Figure 5a), MFG Participants spent more voucher/ gift card funds on fish as compared to processed meats (16.4 percent of the dollars spent on Meat compared to 11.4 percent of dollars spent on Meat). However, even though MFG Participants spent more voucher/ gift card funds on fish than on processed meats, they purchased more processed meat items than fish items – of the **Total Meat Items Purchased** (Figure 5b), 16.6 percent were processed meats as compared to 11.3 percent were fish. This may be explained by differences in food prices for these items, such that fresh and frozen fish products cost more in the supermarket than processed meats. For example, at Foodtown in East Harlem, a package of frozen salmon fillets



with six (4-ounce) servings costs about \$17, whereas a package of deli meat with five (2-ounce) servings costs about \$6.50.¹³¹ Furthermore, concerns about exposure to toxins such as mercury often found in fish and lack of knowledge in selecting and preparing fish (particularly fresh fish) are commonly cited barriers to fish consumption¹³² that may have diverted MFG Participants away from purchasing more fish products.

Pantry Staples

Ingredients used in scratch cooking, including oil and vinegar (23.3 percent of the dollars spent on Pantry Staples), seasonings (13.4 percent of the dollars spent on Pantry Staples), eggs (12.5 percent of the dollars spent on Pantry Staples), and baking needs (11 percent of the dollars spent on Pantry Staples) made up more than half of the **Total Dollars Spent on Pantry Staples** (Figure 6a), which suggests that MFG Participants made purchases in order to prepare meals at home. Nut products, including peanut butter and other nut butters, were purchased the least often of all Pantry Staples (3.4 percent of Pantry Staples purchased).

Other Key Points

The data comparison reveals similarities in purchasing behaviors between the MFG Participants and BLS-Surveyed Households, most notably that both populations spent most of their money for food on Fresh Produce, Meat and Pantry Staples. Interestingly, BLS-Surveyed Households spent more on canned, frozen and dried fruits and vegetables compared to MFG Participants, which might be because middle-class Americans rely less on pantries and emergency food programs,

which are common suppliers of these types of items.¹³³

The potential assumption is that the MFG receipt data would be more similar to the SNAP Data, because these datasets come from populations that both receive food assistance. However, the MFG receipt data was more similar to the BLS Data than it was to the SNAP Data. The present data on MFG Participants and BLS-Surveyed Households demonstrates that despite a large income gap and geographic differences in food prices between the comparison groups, people tended to have similar food purchasing behaviors and preferences.

Limitations

MFG had no initial intention of collecting data or conducting research from the program implementation, and therefore the evaluation of potential impact of the program is limited. The vouchers and gift cards were distributed in only two neighborhoods, which limited the scope of who could participate based on where they lived. Lack of supermarket access in the South Bronx was a major challenge to providing a standardized, paper voucher. The use of paper grocery receipts limited the researchers' ability to interpret the data, specifically for receipts that were physically damaged, illegible, or contained undecipherable product codes. Since unidentifiable items were omitted from analysis (154 items, or 3.7 percent of purchases), the data might not entirely reflect the MFG Participants' purchasing habits. The purchasing habits of individuals and the purchasing habits of families could not be compared since the receipts contained no identifiable information about participants.

Additionally, since the vouchers were only provided once to each participant, purchases may not reflect typical purchasing habits and spending patterns could not be examined. Furthermore, seasonality may have influenced food purchases, particularly for Fresh Produce, which varies in price and availability in supermarkets by season.¹³⁴ Findings from this study therefore only reflect purchasing habits during the summer of 2021; MFG Participants might have spent their voucher/gift card funds differently had they been distributed during a different time of year.

An important limitation of the comparative data is that the MFG receipt data reflects primary data collected from MFG Participants and the SNAP Data reflects primary data collected from SNAP households, whereas the BLS Data reflects secondary, self-reported data. In addition, data collection methods differed among the datasets. MFG receipt data reflects grocery purchases totaled over one or more grocery visits, BLS Data reflects grocery purchases averaged over a one-week period, and SNAP Data reflects grocery purchases totaled over a one year period.

All three datasets were also collected at different times: the SNAP Data was collected in 2011 (the most recent publicly available data), the BLS Data was collected in 2020, and the MFG receipt data was collected in 2021. Therefore, the comparative data does not consider the implications of price changes over the 10 years since the SNAP Data was collected or the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on food spending patterns of middle class Americans. Expenditures for food away from home (e.g., restaurant meals) declined by almost one-third (32.6 percent) between 2019 and 2020, likely due to stay-at-home orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and expenditures for food at home (e.g., groceries) increased by 6.4 percent during that same time period.¹³⁵

Another limitation is the differences in how food products were defined and categorized. For example, the BLS Data had its own category for 'Fats and Oils' for foods such as peanut butter and salad dressings, whereas the MFG receipt data did not. These foods were instead separated into nuts (peanut butter) and staples (salad dressings) according to the best judgment of the researchers.





Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion and Recommendations

MFG vouchers and gift cards provided an immediate, albeit temporary, means of purchasing food for low-income families and individuals located in the underserved communities of East Harlem and the South Bronx. The need for food assistance in these underserved communities grew exponentially during COVID-19, especially as disruptions in the emergency food network made access to free food and meals unreliable.¹³⁶

This program was simple for MFG Participants to follow, as they were able to shop at local supermarkets that many of them were already familiar with, resulting in a high redemption rate of the vouchers and gift cards. Gift cards were redeemed at 100 percent and vouchers were redeemed at 92 percent. The program required minimal expertise and resources to be carried out by the community and was executed by the community organizations and the supermarkets easily. Supermarket managers played an important role in the program's success by training their cashiers on how to handle the vouchers and interacting with participants. MFG noted that community organizations as well as supermarkets reported wanting to provide vouchers in this way again. Unused vouchers were given to supermarket employees. Community organizations were pleased to provide community members with increased access

to groceries and supermarkets and noted that the initiative was a powerful marketing tool in bringing people into the supermarkets.

In addition, program implementation was inexpensive and did not require significant administration. Participants were recruited from community organizations ([Boriken Neighborhood Health Center](#), [Union Settlement](#), [Violence Intervention Program](#), and the [Safe Passage Project](#)) from which they already received services, so no funding was needed for marketing. Low-tech paper vouchers eliminated the need for costly point-of-sale systems, and only \$250 was needed to print the vouchers on special fraud-proof paper, which was the only administrative expense.

This novel program should be replicated with a larger population to maximize reach and to better understand its potential public health impact. It would be beneficial to examine how vouchers may influence purchasing habits over time by distributing multiple rounds of vouchers to the same group of participants over a longer period of time. Future studies should examine the food purchasing trends across multiple shopping visits.

Furthermore, future voucher distributions could involve evaluation tools such as surveys and



qualitative interviews to provide a demographic snapshot of participants and solicit feedback to make scalable improvements. This data would also help researchers gain insights into the participants' experience of using vouchers, including if and how the vouchers made a noticeable impact on their budget. Such tools would require additional resources and greater involvement by participants, but could also provide valuable insight on the cultural food choices of different populations, which was not examined in the present study. Additionally, future distributions should explore creating electronic voucher benefits with similar technology to the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards used by SNAP recipients in order to regulate processes and help to minimize the stigma associated with using paper vouchers.

Overall, this pilot program was successful in providing people in need of food assistance both the money to buy their own food, and the autonomy to choose exactly what they wanted to purchase.

As New Yorkers continue to grapple with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term solutions to food insecurity are critical. An [op-ed from the New York Daily News](#) highlighted the need for food vouchers, stating that:

Food voucher programs would ensure that all New Yorkers have monetary resources to purchase food, as well as the flexibility to purchase culturally relevant foods. Vouchers would help to alleviate the stress and uncertainty felt by individuals on any given day about where and when their next meal will come from.¹³⁷

In a 2022 virtual panel discussion led by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center,

panelists discussed whether incentive and voucher programs could replace food pantries.¹³⁸ Panelist Grace Holihen, Director of Nutrition and Meals at [GMHC](#), a non-profit organization servicing individuals living with HIV/AIDS, explained that vouchers are what the people who receive food and services from community organizations and groups prefer and support.¹³⁹ From her experience speaking directly with clients facing food insecurity, Holihen emphasized that an incentive model (compared to a pantry model) is the future of food assistance because it gives people what pantries often cannot: choice and dignity.¹⁴⁰ The City could address the gap in access to emergency food resources for New Yorkers in need through supermarket-based voucher programs, using a similar design to the novel initiative in the present study. Based on this pilot program as well as review of literature and understanding of policy and community needs, some recommendations to local policymakers and public officials on how to prioritize these programs include:

- Provide City-funding and implementation assistance for voucher programs through trusted community-based and faith-based organizations.
- Establish policies and practices at City agencies (including the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Social Services) that can enroll individuals in voucher programs for which they are eligible, regardless of immigration status.¹⁴¹
- Expand capabilities of community groups and supermarkets to invest in and accept voucher programs.¹⁴²

- Support immigrants' access to voucher programs by dispelling common fears and encouraging immigrants to apply.¹⁴³
- Expand NYC's [Get the Good Stuff](#) program to more supermarkets and grocery stores in underserved communities.

With proper design and support from the City, food voucher programs could be made available to all people experiencing food insecurity, particularly for undocumented immigrants who don't qualify for public assistance programs such as SNAP, to purchase food in supermarkets and grocery stores. As the City gradually recovers from the COVID-era economic shutdown, the benefit of supermarket-based voucher programs is two-fold: diverting people away from food pantries as a main source of food and into neighborhood stores would keep food dollars close to home and support local businesses,¹⁴⁴ while reducing the cost burden of food resources for households. Furthermore, supermarket-based voucher programs would empower people to make their own food choices, which could support cultural food needs and preferences and ultimately improve participants' quality of life during COVID times and beyond.





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