

# NYC Sentinel

## [Filling the pantries, New York City's hungry children](#)

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[Children, News](#)

**By Alexandra Waldhorn**

Ben took a bright fuchsia laminated card with the number 108 written on it and waited for his turn at the Hour Children food pantry in Queensbridge, Queens. It was his first time getting free groceries.

Last month, Ben, a writing teacher and tutor who calls himself “underemployed,” spent \$604 on food for his family of four. “We can’t do that anymore,” he said as he stood in the parking lot entryway to the small pantry. Still, Ben, who didn’t want to give his last name, said the decision to come to a food pantry was a difficult one. “It’s embarrassing.”

But Ben and his wife, who is also a teacher, have two kids with insatiable appetites — 10-year-old Sarah and three-year old Alex. An empty refrigerator isn’t an option.

“You put your pride away and do what you got to do,” he said.

Over the past year, lines at many of the city’s 1,000 emergency food organizations have gotten longer, and many of the people are younger as the recession’s crippling effects continue. A new report by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCA) found that there has been a 21 percent spike in the number of people who depend on emergency food since the beginning of 2009.

Of the 1.3 million New Yorkers who don’t have consistent access to adequate food 417,000 of them are children, according to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

“The annual hunger survey showed that of the populations that increased ‘greatly’ at responding agencies over the past year, the fastest growth was seen among families with children,” said Kerry Birnbach, program director of the Interfaith Voices Against Hunger at the NYCCA.

This means that one of every five children in the city is fed with the assistance of a soup kitchen or food pantry. There are approximately 1.9 million children age 17 and younger living in 976,000 households throughout New York City.

“It’s no longer an underclass problem. It has spread to the general population,” said Ben. According to the Food Bank for New York City, an organization that procures and

distributes food to pantries, food prices have soared – up 15 percent between 2003 and 2007.

Many of the families new to food pantry lines are working-class who make too much money to be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, but do not earn enough to be self-sufficient. In New York City, a family of three earning \$22,900 would not qualify for SNAP, but they would need to earn over \$56,000 to be considered self-sufficient.

For Ben, his family's monthly budget for food has increased \$200 over the past couple of years. "I think the solution is food stamps for all Americans, without conditions," he said. "Food, especially milk, has been subsidized for decades in Europe. Why not here?"

For children, there can be long-term effects to going hungry. City Harvest, an emergency food organization in New York City, reported that chronic hunger and food insecurity could result in delayed growth and development and behavioral problems.

"A child's nutrition is crucial to their success at school and their behavior so it's a public health issue we need to address, especially at a time when obesity and diabetes are becoming more and more common," Birnbach said.

"Kids have to eat 24/7," said John Clifton, 60. He doesn't have any kids of his own but over the past six months, when he started coming to the pantry, he has observed more kids waiting in the longer lines. "I can get through it, but not kids."

Outside the food pantry in Queensbridge, several other visitors waiting their turn spoke about the difficulties of keeping their pantries full.

Carmen Ronals sat in a plastic white chair waiting for number 85 to be called. A dark green beanie covered her hair and a long black leather jacket that a friend just gave her brushed the pavement. She depends on the food pantry to feed her husband, her adult daughter and her two young granddaughters that live with her. In her food trolley, a plastic bag held two thick wool sweaters she had just bought from a thrift store for two dollars a piece.

Ronals' husband, who has AIDS, receives SNAP support, but all of that money goes directly into her husband's account to provide for his strict diet that he has to follow because of his AIDS medications. Taking care of her husband, as well as her son, who also has AIDS, and her sister who has lupus is a full time job. This has left little time and money to get groceries. But the food pantry allows her to feed her family with more ease. "It helps make ends meet," she said.

A few feet away, 10-year-old Karen Avila sat on another chair doing her homework with her mother, Marcia. She got to the pantry at 2:30 to get a good number, and waited till Karen joined her after school.

“If you come late, you get less food,” Avila said. The wait can get tedious. Every 30 minutes, a pantry volunteer comes outside and calls numbers in groups of 10. Some visitors said it was a quiet day compared to the past Monday, when some people were turned away.

A petite woman originally from Ecuador, Avila is a hairdresser but is currently out of work. Beyond what she can get at the pantry three times a month, Avila still spends an additional \$50 a week on outside grocery shopping.

“Just the food pantry isn’t enough,” she said.

At school, Karen receives the free lunch provided to the more than 600,000 city school children who fall below the poverty level. Sometimes she gets to school in time for the free breakfast, which ends at 7:50 a.m.

When asked about hunger issues at school, Karen said one girl had to visit the nurse because she was hungry. “She gave her some crackers to see if she could hold off until lunch,” she said.

Birnbach, from the NYCCA, forecasts improvements to school nutrition with the recent extension of the federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization.

“It has potential to expand school meals and make them healthier, which would be a big step in helping students concentrate and stay healthy,” she said.

At 5:30, their number, 28, is called and Karen and mother, along with two friends, go into the pantry. They hand Christy Robb, who runs the pantry, a blue punch card and start their way down the pantry’s two aisles. Unlike many other pantries where you receive a prepackaged box of food, this one is “client choice.”

The pantry has a familial feeling. Robb deftly manages the line, saying hello to the returning customers and welcoming the newcomers. But she also keeps a keen eye on the food, making sure people take only what is allotted to them. People can choose one to two items per food group and normally leave with about ten items. “We’re struggling to keep food in here,” she said to one passing visitor.

Walking down the aisles, Avila looks carefully at all the food but she has to be quick. They have to keep the line going.

“Milk or juice, you can only pick one,” said Karim Dewidar, who occasionally volunteers at the pantry, to Avila.

Avila fills up two yellow plastic bags set inside a food trolley. She takes two packs of single servings of applesauce, two bags of rice, a box of breakfast cookies, rice cereal, two onions, one yam, a potato, a can of beef ravioli, four boxes of sardines and a can of tuna.

“That’s it ma’am,” said another pantry volunteer as Avila reached the end of the second aisle. She glanced down at her trolley, and said, “Can I change the tuna for beans?”