

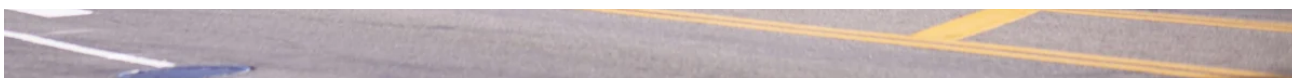
LATEST NEWS

Facing rising food insecurity in NYC, Haitian seniors turn to local pantries



BY LEONARDO MARCH
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Locals at the Children of the Light Food Pantry in Canarsie wait for the pantry to open on Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. Eighty percent of visitors in this pantry are Haitian, its director said. Photo by Leonardo March.

BROOKLYN — The line at the food pantry, Children of the Light in Canarsie, was moving swiftly, as people gave their information to the pantry volunteer to collect a bag filled with groceries.

“It’s good comfort to know you have something at the house,” said Mary L., a 64-year old Haitian woman, while standing in line on a recent Friday, at the beginning of November. “As we begin to get old, lifestyle changes and things take a downward turn. You feel that if the help is available and you don’t make use of it, [then] it’s your fault.”

In 2015, Mary lost her job as a receptionist. As times got tougher, she began coming to the pantry in Canarsie two years ago. Now, Mary is among scores of older Haitians relying on food pantries throughout New York City as food insecurity grips many families across all boroughs. Citywide, one in five seniors rely on food pantries according to the [Food Bank of New York City](#), twice as much as before the pandemic.

Statistics about how many of those seniors are Haitian are not available. However, several food pantry directors in Brooklyn estimated that 25% to 80% of their operation’s total recipients are Haitian.

“We do have a high percentage of the Haitian community. I would say we have about 55%,” said Michelle Gibbs, board chair of the West Indian American Day Carnival Association.

The organization, better known for organizing the Labor Day parade, opened a soup kitchen and food pantry in Crown Heights in March 2020. Gibbs said the move was due to the “necessity for food in our community, especially for our seniors” after the city lockdown.

Pandemic highlights persistent need for pantries

Through the year-long COVID-19 shutdown and several months since the New York City [officially reopened](#), long lines at some pantries are still common across the city. In some places, the need is greater.

“It’s [gotten] worse,” said Pastor Maureen Rush, founder of the Children of the Light Food Pantry, which has been operating since 2009. “We see more and more people now due to and because of all different

reasons: Income loss, somebody's family member, loss of jobs, food prices, inflation. People just come to our food pantry.”

Rush, whose pantry served 3,007 visitors in October, said most of the recipients are Haitian.

In 2020, as the city economy shed jobs because of the pandemic lockdown, many New Yorkers had to rely on food pantries, soup kitchens and other local food programs. People served at food pantries in the first 6 months of 2020 **nearly doubled** from 3,392,824 to 6,569,071, according to the Emergency Food Assistance Program by the Human Resources Administration.

From March to June 2021, the number of people served at pantries was 20% higher than the quarter prior, to about 8.2 million, according to HRA.

About 50 food pantries operate in Haitian enclaves across Brooklyn, with a quarter of them in the 11226 zip code encompassing mostly Flatbush.

Low-paying jobs, little Social Security also factors

There, outside the CAMBA food pantry on Snyder Avenue, many of the elders had been waiting in line for hours before the pantry opened at 10 a.m., during a recent visit. They had arrived early to secure the best-quality food, which can run out quickly.

Many of the retirees in line said that shopping for groceries at supermarkets is too expensive.

“Social Security doesn’t give you enough to survive, only to pay rent,” said Denise, 71, who declined to give her name. The Cap-Haïtien, Haiti native, who has lived in the US since the early 1990s, said her \$900 monthly check from Social Security covers rent and some of her medicines — leaving little for food.

Another factor that shapes why immigrants have lower social security payments is the type of jobs they traditionally take upon arriving in the U.S. Christian González-Rivera, director of strategic policy initiatives at the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, said immigrants are more likely to work in jobs that pay less when they arrive.





A man walks past bags and other items used by food pantry clients to hold their spots in line at the Gethsemane SDA Church food pantry in Crown Heights/Flatbush, Brooklyn, on November 17, 2021. Photo by Leonardo March.

“That means less savings, and also less of a cushion for financial setbacks in older age,” González-Rivera said.

Food insecurity is a consequence of such financial setbacks for Haitian elders, he said. Thus, their dependence on free-food programs.

For Mary in Canarsie, the goal is to do her best with what she has, “stretching it, making it work.”

“I come from a culture where we are grateful to have anything,” Mary said, as she picked up her groceries. “It’s our nature, our culture. We’re not looking for abundance or indulgence.”

To donate food or other items, contact the following pantries:

- *Children of the Light, Pastor Maureen Rush (347) 794-4130*
- *Gethsemane SDA Church food pantry, Antoine Vaval (347)-267-5145*