

July 2020

## Food to Go:

# Did NYC Open Grab & Go Sites in Areas With the Greatest Need?

### Summary

As Covid-19 spread, hunger and food insecurity became a growing issue as the city's schools closed and job layoffs and furloughs mounted with the shuttering of much of the local economy. Before the pandemic, New York's schools served about 1 million meals a day to students. Ensuring these students—and adults in need—had access to food became a prime concern for the de Blasio Administration. In response, in mid-March the Mayor established the Grab & Go program at city schools, where anyone in need could pick up meals.

The number of Grab & Go sites has varied over the ensuing weeks. IBO examined whether the location of the 470 sites operating on March 30th were in areas with the greatest economic need.

Among our findings:

- More than half the sites—about 54 percent—were located in census tracts where the average household income was below or near the poverty threshold (\$33,562 and \$50,343, respectively) as defined by the Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity.
- The majority of students, 88 percent, lived within half a mile of a Grab & Go site. The median distance to a Grab & Go site was five blocks from a student's home.
- Community School Districts 9 in the South Bronx, 20 in southwest Brooklyn, and 31 in Staten Island had the most Grab & Go sites. Each of these districts had 29 sites.

While quickly established, the Grab & Go sites have not fully met the problem of hunger and food insecurity across the city. In the last week of April, the sites provided an average of 305,000 meals a day, well below the number schools typically served. With lines for the city's food pantries and soup kitchens continuing to remain long, the Mayor has announced several other measures to help meet the need, including participation in the state's Pandemic Electronic Funds Transfer program, for which all students are eligible, and employing 11,000 Taxi and Limousine Commission-licensed drivers to deliver meals to low-income seniors.

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## Schools Close, Food Available

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city's public schools would temporarily close in order to help prevent further spread of Covid-19. While the city's education department began preparations for e-learning and opening regional enrichment centers to serve children of first responders and other essential personnel, it also immediately offered free meals to all students as allowed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the New York State Education Department. This brief describes the Grab & Go program and examines the initial locations of the food distribution sites and their proximity to communities most likely to need food support.

During the first week that schools were closed, Grab & Go breakfasts and lunches were provided at all schools weekdays from 7:30am to 1:30pm. During the second week (beginning March 23<sup>rd</sup>), up to three meals a day were offered across 448 sites, which increased to 470 sites the following week. All three meals could be picked up at the same time, no documentation or identification was required, and parents or guardians could pick up meals for their children. On average during the week of March 30<sup>th</sup>, about 132,000 meals were served daily by the Department of Education (DOE) based on data obtained by IBO. Meal service was expanded to adults on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. More recent data from DOE showed that when the academic year ended—the week of June 22<sup>nd</sup>—over 305,000 meals on average were served daily at Grab & Go sites, including some sites offering Kosher meals, meal deliveries for medically fragile students, and an average of 8,300 meals delivered to homeless shelters daily. Additional meals were provided to adults and to both adults and students at regional enrichment centers.

IBO assembled data on the location of these Grab & Go breakfast sites as of March 30<sup>th</sup>, which we then linked to the median household income of the census tract where the school is located. This let us examine whether the programs were sited in areas with the greatest economic need. We also examined the distance from each student's home to the nearest Grab & Go site.

We found that more than 63 percent of sites were located in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and more than half were located in communities near or below the poverty threshold. Based on where the city's public school students lived during the 2018-2019 school year (our most recent data), nearly 90 percent of students lived within a half mile of a Grab & Go site (about 10 city blocks) and students who lived in the

Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan would have traveled the shortest distances.

## School Meals Offered During Regular Session

When schools are in regular session, schools participating in the Department of Education's school food program serve more than 1 million meals a day to students in New York City. Schools provide qualifying students up to four different meals a day—breakfast, lunch, after-school snack, and after-school supper. New York City school meal participation data, collected under Local Law 215 (2017), categorize six different types of meals. There are three breakfast categories: *breakfast before the bell*, which is a complete breakfast served in the school cafeteria before the start of the school day; *breakfast after the bell/breakfast in the classroom*, which is breakfast served in classrooms after the school day begins; and *Grab & Go*, which is breakfast served from carts either before or after the start of the school day. In the 2018-2019 school year, 428 schools—nearly all of which were elementary schools—opted to provide Grab & Go breakfasts. School meal participation data are also collected on lunches served and two types of after-school meals. *After-school snacks* are defined as meals consisting of two food items, and *after-school supper* is defined as a meal consisting of five food items. Both are provided during after-school educational or enrichment activities.<sup>1</sup>

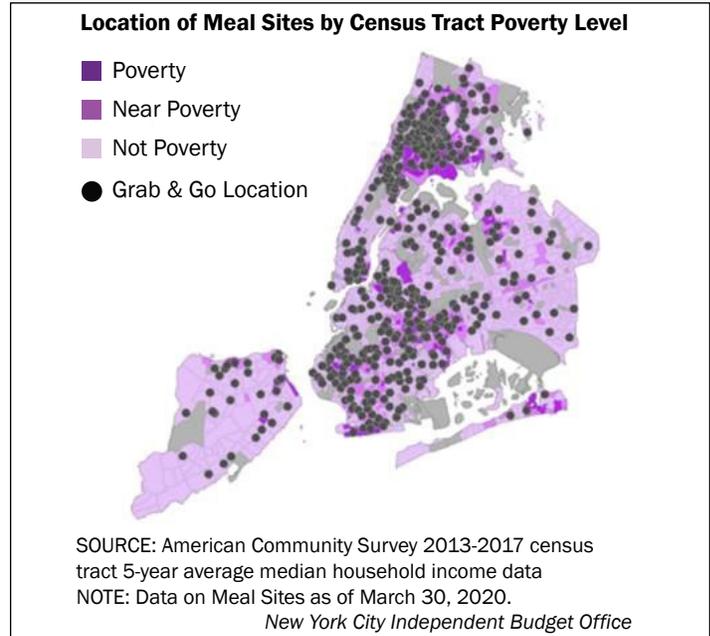
For the 2018-2019 school year, average daily participation in the education department's school meals program included almost 264,000 breakfasts (before the bell and in the classroom), about 603,000 lunches, over 94,000 afterschool snacks, and over 58,000 afterschool suppers in 1,951 schools across the city. The vast majority of schools that participated in the school meals programs were traditional public schools (in school districts 1-32) and charter schools, which together accounted for an average of 88.2 percent of breakfasts, 94.4 percent of lunches, and virtually all after-school meals served. But there were also meals served in schools in the citywide special education district, private/parochial schools, pre-K centers or Head Start programs, alternative high school programs, and alternative learning centers, which serve students with long-term suspensions. Of all schools serving meals, 80.0 percent were traditional public schools (1,560 schools), 8.5 percent were charter schools (166 schools), and 5.8 percent were private/parochial schools (113 schools).

All of the city's public schools (including traditional public schools, charter schools, schools in the citywide special education district, alternative high schools, and alternative

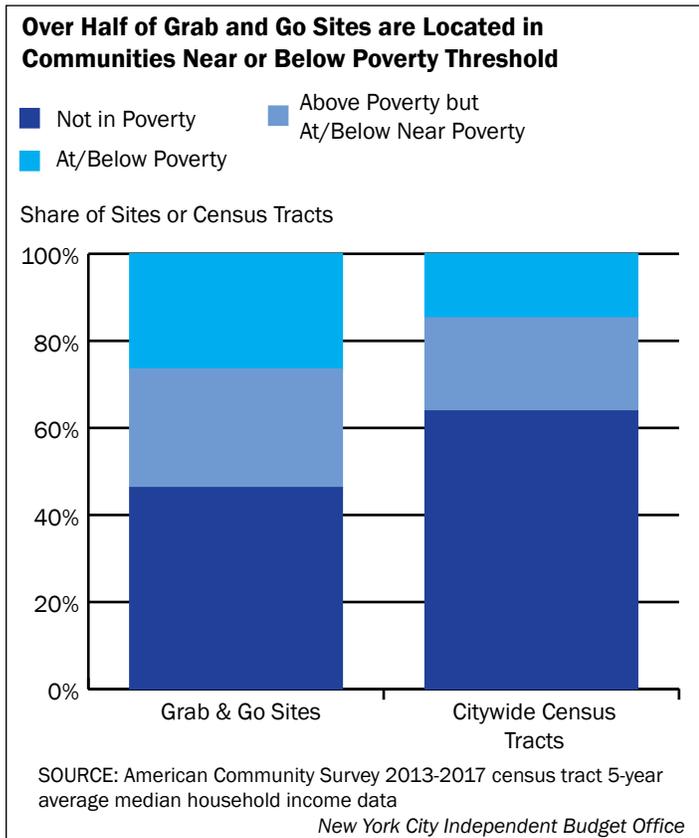
learning center schools) served breakfast in 2018-2019. Almost a quarter of traditional public schools offered the Grab & Go option along with other breakfast options.

**The Location of Sites for Grab & Go Meals During Covid-19**

As of March 30<sup>th</sup>, 470 sites located at schools across the city served up to three different Grab & Go meals daily—fewer than a quarter of schools that normally serve meals. The largest share of sites—39.6 percent—were in Brooklyn (186 sites) and 23.2 percent of sites were in the Bronx (109 sites). Queens and Manhattan had almost equal shares of sites—14.9 percent and 16.2 percent, respectively—and Staten Island had the fewest (6.2 percent). By school district, districts 9 in the South Bronx (including Grand Concourse, Morrisania, and Tremont), 20 in southwest Brooklyn (including Borough Park, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights, and southern Sunset Park), and district 31 (Staten Island) each had 29 sites. The other school districts with 20 or more sites each were district 11 in northeast Bronx (including Pelham Parkway, Eastchester, and Woodlawn); districts 21 and 22 in south Brooklyn (Coney Island, Brighton Beach, Ditmas Park, and Mill Basin); district 2 in Manhattan (covering downtown, midtown east, and the Upper East Side); and district 10 in the northwest Bronx (including Riverdale, Wave Hill, Fordham, Belmont, and Kingsbridge).



IBO sought to assess the extent to which meal sites were located in neighborhoods with the greatest need. To do this, we used the five-year average (2013-2017) median household income for individual census tracts in the city, which we refer to as communities, from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.<sup>2</sup> Based on the Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity’s 2017 poverty thresholds for a family of four, we grouped communities across the city into three categories: those at or below the poverty level (median household income of \$33,562 or below); those above the poverty level but at or below near poverty (median household income of \$33,563 to \$50,343); and those not in poverty (median household income greater than \$50,343).



IBO found that the majority of sites (53.7 percent) were located in communities near or below the poverty threshold, with the largest share of sites located in communities near poverty. While just 14.8 percent of the city’s census tracts are at or below poverty, 26.5 percent of the Grab & Go sites were located in such communities. At the other end of the spectrum, a smaller share of Grab & Go sites were located in communities not in poverty (46.3 percent) compared with the citywide distribution of such communities (63.9 percent of the city’s census tracts are not in poverty).

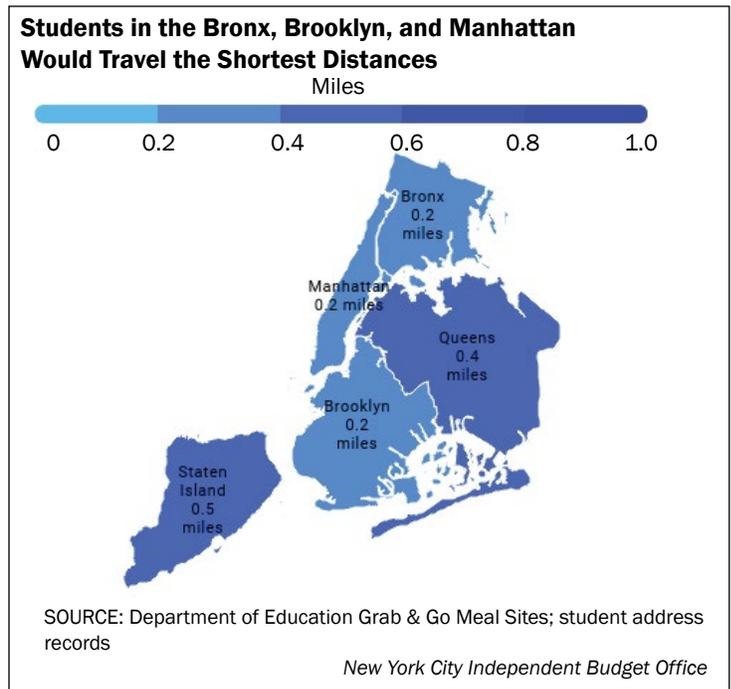
**How Far Must Public School Students Travel to Reach Grab & Go Sites?**

Although meals were not limited to public school students, IBO analyzed how the Grab & Go sites aligned with the geographic distribution of public school students, the primary

target for the Grab & Go program. Using the addresses of public school students from the 2018-2019 school year, we looked at the average distance to the nearest school meal site for all students, as well as separately for students who come from neighborhoods in poverty, near poverty, and not in poverty. On average, students lived roughly one-third of a mile from the nearest meal site (roughly six city blocks).

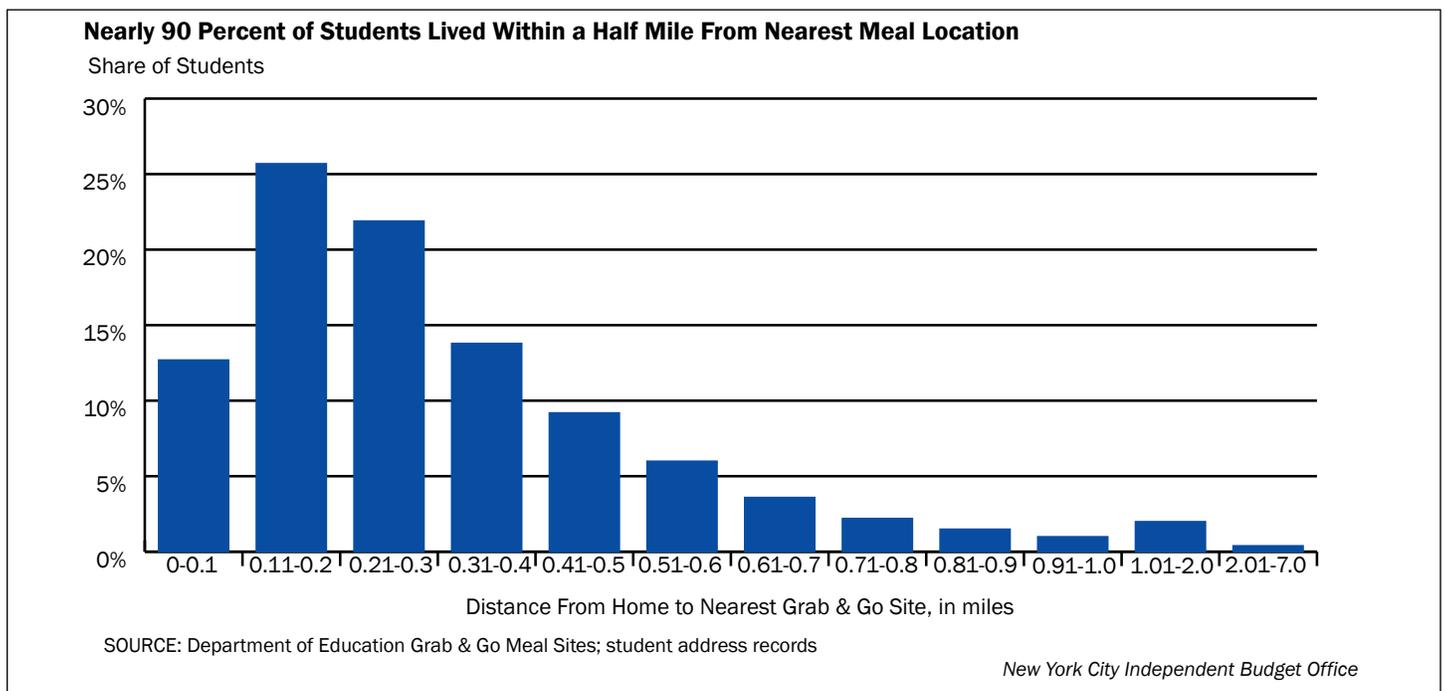
Looking at the distribution of students by distance from the nearest meal location, the majority of students (88.3 percent) lived within a half mile of a Grab & Go site—10 city blocks—with 38.4 percent living within one-fifth of a mile (4 city blocks). Virtually all students lived within 1 mile from the nearest site (11 to 20 city blocks) and only 2.4 percent of students lived more than 1 mile from the nearest site. The farthest distance between students’ homes and meal sites—nearly 7 miles—occurred in Queens; fewer than 20 students lived this far away.

To account for differences in geography across the city, we also looked at the distance between students’ homes and nearest meal locations within each of the five boroughs. The median distance—meaning half of the students travel further and half travel less—that students in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn would have to travel is 0.2 miles from the nearest meal site. Using medians avoids distortions that can result from extreme high and low values. Not surprisingly, the median distance students would travel in the less densely populated boroughs of Queens and Staten Island is twice as far—0.4 and 0.5 miles, respectively.



### Conclusion

In response to school closures in the wake of the pandemic, the Department of Education moved swiftly to establish meal sites for students in neighborhoods where income level reflected the greatest need and modeled the delivery of meals based on the existing Grab & Go breakfast program. In the last week of March, a total of 470 sites served up to three Grab & Go meals daily, with over half of sites located in neighborhoods that were near or below the poverty threshold. Meal sites were placed



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at a relatively accessible distance for students, with a median distance of five blocks from home and four blocks for students living in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Still, average daily participation in meals is much lower than when schools are operating under normal conditions and lines for the city's food pantries continue to remain long.

On April 15<sup>th</sup> Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city is investing \$170 million in various programs to provide meals to New Yorkers. While the Grab & Go sites remain part of the city's efforts, the city is also participating in New York State's plans to offer meals to families through Pandemic Electronic Funds Transfer (P-EBT), for which all public school students are eligible. In addition to providing sites where meals are available, the Mayor plans to provide

additional meal delivery services to low-income residents over age 60 and those with other health risks by employing more than 11,000 Taxi and Limousine Commission-licensed drivers. The city also will seek to expand access to federal food programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Women, Infants, and Children program. As other efforts to provide meals expand, the education department's Grab & Go program will continue to play an integral role in making food more accessible to all New Yorkers.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>These data are used to measure average daily meals for all categories, citywide as well as, for schools, community school districts, and boroughs. Not included in these data are what are called second chance breakfasts, which are offered to students who arrive to school late. Moreover, since there is no uniform method for counting breakfast in the classroom, exact numbers distinguishing between breakfasts served in the cafeteria and breakfasts served in classrooms are not available.

<sup>2</sup>To ensure that our estimates of median household income are reliable, we only include estimates for which the coefficient of variation—the percent of sampling error associated with an estimate—was less than or equal to 30 percent.

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