



Arab-American Family
Support Center

ACCESSIBILITY OF HALAL FOOD AID IN NYC

A QUALITATIVE AND
QUANTITATIVE STUDY



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

2 HALAL FOOD

3 METHODS

4–8 KEY FINDINGS

9 CONCLUSION

10 REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

The Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC) is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization founded in Brooklyn in 1994 to provide culturally and linguistically competent, trauma-informed social services. While we support anyone who walks through our doors, over 28 years, we have developed expertise in serving Arab, Middle Eastern, North African, Muslim, and South Asian (AMENAMSA) immigrant and refugee communities. We are dedicated to supporting these communities as they overcome a nexus of challenges, including lingering trauma, discrimination, poverty, and acculturative stressors. As a settlement house, AAFSC is geographically embedded in the communities we serve, with 14 locations across all five boroughs of NYC.

All our priority areas – Promote, Prevent, Get Ready, and Communicate – are interlinked. We promote wellness, prevent gender-based violence and child abuse, provide the tools for learners of every age to succeed, and communicate community needs to partners and policymakers.

In light of the recent finding in AAFSC's ongoing Community Needs Assessments that 64% of families in our network are experiencing food insecurity, we have doubled up on our efforts to provide culturally and linguistically competent food resource navigation, benefits enrollment, and direct distribution of cash assistance and food aid. AAFSC witnessed a 357% increase in demand for our Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment program amid the COVID-19 public health crisis. In response, AAFSC enrolled over 900 beneficiaries in SNAP over the past year. Particularly as several halal grocers throughout NYC accept Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) payment, we have found this approach can offer a step towards food security for eligible families who qualify.

However, even for families enrolled in SNAP, food security remains a challenge – a study from Insight Policy Research demonstrates that

about one-quarter of all households exhaust virtually all their SNAP benefits within a week of receipt, and more than half exhaust virtually all benefits within the first two weeks. Further, as maximum SNAP allotments are uniform across all states, SNAP benefits alone are typically inadequate to maintain food security in New York City, where the cost-of-living is significantly higher (Castner et al. 2017).

AAFSC aims to offer sustainable food security options that serve to mitigate the necessity for emergency food aid. However, for families who do not qualify for SNAP, those who are facing acute financial crises, and families awaiting the processing of their public benefit applications, AAFSC recognizes that options for short-term and immediate relief of food insecurity are essential. This need is reflected in the utilization of AAFSC's Emergency Relief Fund. AAFSC has distributed over \$800,000 through our Emergency Relief Fund since the start of the pandemic, 69% of which has been used by clients to cover urgent food costs. Further, as many community members have reported difficulty finding offerings that meet their restrictions at food pantries and food banks, AAFSC recently launched a Family Essentials Pantry and has distributed over 2,000 halal food boxes (including fresh meat, produce and nonperishables) thus far in 2022.

Still, as a community-based organization with an intimate knowledge of the communities we serve, we are conscious that culturally appropriate food aid is dangerously limited. While we are steadfast in our commitment to direct services and direct distribution, in the long-term, AAFSC seeks to advance the overall accessibility and navigability of halal and culturally appropriate food options in NYC. To this end, the AAFSC Research Institute conducted a mixed methods study on the availability of halal food aid in NYC and the barriers food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens face in providing halal food.

HALAL FOOD

According to a recent report from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, over 750,000 Muslims live in New York City. In fact, 22.3% of U.S. Muslims live in NYC, and the Muslim community is rapidly growing (Becker, 2019). With an increasing number of New Yorkers identifying as Muslim, the need for accessible halal food is also rising. Bloomberg estimates that the U.S. halal food market is upwards of \$20 billion annually—and it is poised to grow by \$8.17 billion by 2024 (Maida, 2020).

Halal, a word meaning “permissible” in Arabic, is used to describe food products that are permissible to consume under Islamic dietary laws. Halal guidelines require animals to be slaughtered and processed in accordance with Islamic procedures, under supervision. Food products must also be free of alcohol and pork or pork byproducts in order to be certified as halal. Halal rules also require all equipment to be properly cleaned to prevent cross contamination between halal and non-halal food. In New York State, the Halal Foods Protection Act requires manufacturers, producers, packers, and distributors of food that is certified as halal to register with the Department of Agriculture and Markets. This includes food establishments, retailers, restaurants, caterers, and food carts that sell food prepared on their premises or under their control which is represented as halal. Additionally, individuals, companies, or organizations who certify entities as halal are required to register as certifiers.

While approximately 9% of NYC’s population identifies as Muslim, a central repository of halal-friendly food assistance programs does not exist. In our 28 years of direct service experience, AAFSC has identified a pressing need for the evaluation of the halal emergency food assistance landscape in the city. As such, in this report, AAFSC considers data from a range of vantage points in order to synthesize

feasible and sustainable recommendations to meet the needs of the communities we serve. By identifying barriers to culturally appropriate food provision faced by food pantries and soup kitchens and examining the current halal food assistance landscape, AAFSC is informing the strategic expansion of our food distribution and resource navigation initiatives while providing recommendations related to food aid for AMENAMSA communities to our city and community-based partners.

This project was made possible by the NYU Langone Community Engagement and Population Health Research Program (CEPHR) at the Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) through the National Institutes of Health National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (grant UL1TR001445). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding organizations.



METHODS

This research project integrated both quantitative and qualitative data collection, including the following methods:

We surveyed food pantries and soup kitchens in all 5 boroughs via a telephone-administered questionnaire. This questionnaire investigated the demand these purveyors have experienced in relation to halal and culturally appropriate food, as well as the barriers they may have faced to sourcing and providing this food to community members. This project employed a purposive sampling strategy to create two comparison groups: the first sample group included food pantries/soup kitchens in regions of NYC with a high (>30%) concentration of Arab, Middle Eastern, North African, Muslim, and South Asian (AMENAMSA) community members; the second sample group included food pantries/soup kitchens from a random selection of regions with a relatively lower (<30%) concentration of AMENAMSA community members. Regions were selected based on GIS (Geographic Information Systems) analysis of language and country of origin data collected by the American Communities Survey, as described in AAFSC's Story Map: Affordable Health Services in NYC's Immigrant Communities.

The first sample group included a selection of food pantries/soup kitchens in South/Southwest Brooklyn (Bay Ridge, Sunset Park, Kensington, Bensonhurst, Brighton Beach), Central Queens (Jamaica, Richmond Hill, Hillside, Briarwood), Northwest Queens (Woodside, Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Corona, Astoria) and the Bronx (Parkchester, Morris

Park, Pelham Bay, Allerton, The Valley, Kingsbridge, Fordham Manor, and Throgs Neck). The second sample group included a selection of food

pantries/soup kitchens from any region in NYC excluding those identified in the list above. The sample groups were generated using a list of food pantries and soup kitchens maintained by [Get Food NYC](#). We captured 35 from both survey groups with a total of 70 surveys completed.

AAFSC also conducted five long-form, semi-structured qualitative interviews with experienced health service providers and resource navigators who work specifically with AMENAMSA communities to advance food security. AAFSC employs and partners with skilled professionals with decades of experience serving AMENAMSA communities through the lens of health and well-being. In these interviews, we gathered data on community members' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current culturally appropriate offerings, with an emphasis on issues like nutritional value and accessibility, as well as service providers' assessment of the navigability of the emergency food landscape for halal-observant communities.

Finally, AAFSC conducted a listening session with members of New York City's AMENAMSA immigrant community in order to gain their perspective on the experience of accessing culturally appropriate food options at food pantries and soup kitchens. We conducted the listening session with a total of 10 participants, recruited through the service population of a partner food pantry (Islamic Circle of North American (ICNA)) located in Jamaica, Queens. A culturally and linguistically competent AAFSC staff member with deep knowledge of the community and extensive experience facilitating community conversations facilitated the group in Bangla.



KEY FINDINGS

As stated above, many of the clients accessing AAFSC's services require some form of food assistance, and many are enrolled in SNAP. It has become increasingly apparent that for many of our families the SNAP allotment is insufficient; our clients often deplete the funds before they are able to purchase the full complement of healthy and culturally relevant foods they need to feed themselves and their families.

Our interviews with AAFSC staff have revealed that inflation-related increases in cost of living, along with the economic insecurity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have all put increased pressure on the purchasing power of the AMENAMSA community members served by AAFSC. As a result, many members of our community are turning to food pantries.

Below, we explore four areas that emerged through our research as critical considerations in the accessibility and equity of the emergency food landscape for halal-observant communities.



KEY FINDING

1 EXPECTATIONS AROUND THE AVAILABILITY OF HALAL FOOD

Many Muslims in NYC that require food assistance keep a halal diet. Halal, a word meaning “permissible” in Arabic, requires certain food preparation processes to be followed and prohibits some foods such as pork and alcohol. Our survey revealed that only 38% of pantries in our sample carry halal food options, and, of these, 89% indicated that those options included halal meat. This landscape places Muslim communities at a disadvantage, as they are not able to equally benefit from food aid resources and are often subject to exclusionary practices. Andrew Jones, Director of Community Health and Well-Being at AAFSC, recalls a Thanksgiving food distribution event in 2021 in which he had notified the organizers in advance that many Muslim community members would be attending. Despite advocacy for provision of a halal meat option, on the day of the distribution, no alternative was made available, and he saw many Muslim families leave the distribution empty-handed.

Many Muslims also exercise caution in selecting options at food pantries, as a majority of them do not offer explicitly halal options.

Noshin Ahmed, a Community Outreach and Enrollment Coordinator at AAFSC, explains that her Muslim clients who use food pantries do not expect to find halal meat explicitly, but seek options that will help them best maintain the halal diet. She reports that they are “more mindful about what they’re taking...they would strictly [take] vegetables [and] groceries that are permissible. And if there is a canned item, I think they might hesitate.” This is a particularly significant issue as many of the food pantries surveyed in this project stated that the majority of the options offered are canned or processed foods. Halal-observing clients that participated in the focus groups stated that they prefer whole ingredients over processed foods because they can be confident in the integrity and permissibility of their meal’s ingredients.

On the rare occasion that a halal food option is explicitly offered, there is often a lack of trust in the authenticity of its halal quality. As Mirum Zafar, another Community Outreach and Enrollment Coordinator, explains; “There was a food pantry serving halal chicken tenders. They were frozen, but I observed two clients who declined to take those chicken tenders and instead took the fish because they know that, irrespective of whether it’s halal or non-halal, it’s still fish. So, it’s always going to be considered halal and permissible.” Zafar went on to explain that this represents issues around trust in the food pantries and lack of communication and rapport with the community members about the sourcing of their foods. As such, Muslims do their best to work with the offerings that are made available to them; they “don’t expect to be catered to” explains Ahmed. It seems that, at the very least, provision of whole ingredients helps families exercise more agency over their pantry food consumption and maintain confidence in their halal observance.



KEY FINDING

2 CULTURALLY SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR HALAL FOOD NEED AND AVAILABILITY

Along with the difficulties associated with accessing halal food, there are also many concerns around the availability of culturally relevant food (CRF) that complies with the diets and practices of the diverse Muslim communities of NYC. Improving access to healthy CRF improves diets of minority populations, who are disproportionately affected by poor diet quality, obesity, and chronic disease (Harper et al. 2020).

Jones mentioned that, even when food banks have non-processed foods available, they are often generic and are not always suitable to the diets of the many Muslim communities in NYC. For example, Zafar explained that her clients often note an inability to find Atta flour, a staple food in many South Asian and Middle Eastern diets that cannot be replaced by the generic all-purpose flour that is often provided in food pantries. The food pantry Zafar referenced did not carry this product despite their proximity to a heavily South Asian community in Queens, and majority-Muslim patronage. Food pantries also raise the issue of availability of CRF via our survey. ICNA Relief, which has six food pantries across the city serving many thousands of Muslim families every month, explained that their biggest challenge in serving Muslims in NYC is accommodating their many diverse diets and food needs that go beyond just halal meat availability.

One way in which community members have been able to exercise choice in their food selection to best match their culturally specific dietary needs is through the use of community market style food distribution sites.

Jones explained that at the YMCA in Coney Island, the Westside Campaign Against Hunger, and the NY Common Pantry the employment of a community market approach allows patrons to pick and choose their food selection, allowing them to avoid collecting the kinds of non-halal adherent or unfamiliar food products they might end up with at pre-packaged food distribution sites. In this way, the community market model not only supports the selection of culturally relevant foods, but they may also be more cost effective and prevent food waste.



3 KEY FINDING

CHALLENGES FACED BY FOOD DISTRIBUTION SITES

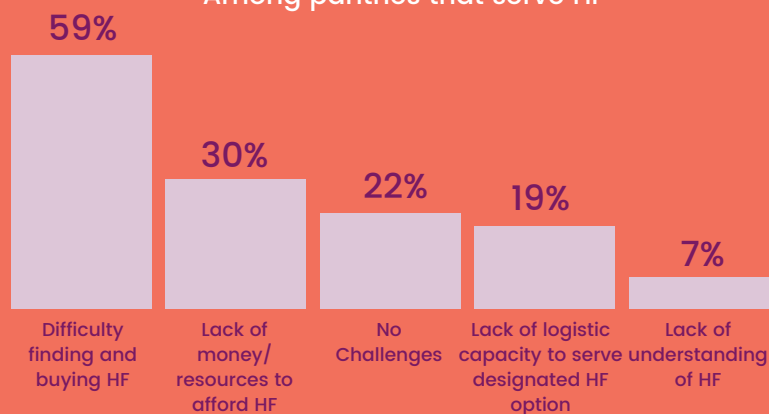
Just as the issue of increasing food costs drives our community members to food pantries for their dietary needs, food prices, and particularly the inflated cost of halal meat, is one of the most significant barriers for virtually all the food pantries surveyed. While halal meat is generally more expensive than regular meat, inflation of the prices of all food goods has placed food pantries in an even more difficult position to allocate funds and resources (NPR, 2022). For pantries that do provide a halal food option, the most commonly reported challenge is difficulty finding and buying halal food products (59%) followed by insufficient funds and resources to afford halal food (30%). Many food banks surveyed also rely on food donations, particularly from the larger operations, which rarely allocate halal options.

Another major challenge reported by food pantries via our survey is that 88% of them are unable to refer clients to pantries that do have halal options when they themselves are unable to accommodate requests. AAFSC staff also report difficulty referring clients to halal food pantries, specifically those carrying halal meat options, that are accessible to clients based on where they live. Many of the surveyed pantries anecdotally mentioned that they are also unable to consistently stock halal food, in some cases due to the nature of food pantry supply chain operations, which makes the task of identifying reliable sources of halal food more difficult, both for community members and resource navigators.

Further exacerbating the challenge of accessibility, only 23% of surveyed pantries have the linguistic capacity to serve NYC's Arabic, Bangla, Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, and Farsi-speaking populations. This is especially significant given that our interviews indicated that halal food access is also contingent on community members' confidence in the authenticity of the halal food offering and more broadly in the practices and ethics of the food pantry overall. This is exceedingly difficult to communicate if pantries are unable to speak with community members in their native languages.

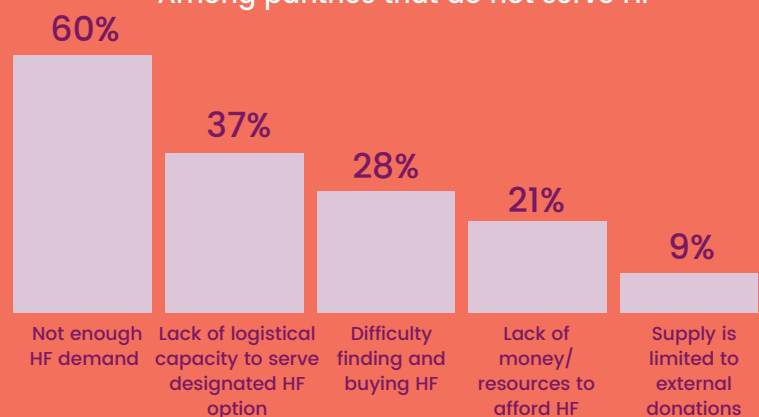
Challenges Food Pantries Encounter Serving Halal Food (HF)

Among pantries that serve HF



Challenges Food Pantries Encounter Serving Halal Food (HF)

Among pantries that do not serve HF



4 KEY FINDING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION: EXAMPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED HALAL FOOD ACCESS

Overall, our survey findings indicate that there are certainly insufficiencies in availability of halal food in food pantries and soup kitchens across the city. However, via our staff interviews, we have identified several organizations that reliably distribute halal food, including: ICNA Relief (which has two locations in Queens, two in Brooklyn, one in the Bronx, and one in Long Island), APNA Community Center, located in Brooklyn, which also serves halal hot meals, the Turkish Cultural Center of Brooklyn, and the Halal Community Fridge in Queens. While those organizations mentioned are all denominationally Muslim, we have also identified Peace by Piece as an organization that reliably serves the Muslim community in Brooklyn. Their unique model involves taking halal food box orders from patrons, purchasing halal meats from Balady, a well-known halal grocery store in Bay Ridge, and supplementing the meat with high quality fresh produce donated by a farm. This model is not only sustainably providing food for community members and minimizing waste and cost by using an order system, but it also establishes community trust by offering halal meat from a trusted community source. Partnerships and communications between community organizations such as AAFSC and larger distributors such as the NYC Food Bank may also facilitate collaborative strategizing around how best to respond to clients' cultural dietary needs.

Beyond highlighting and uplifting this food pantry supply chain model as an approach to circumventing some of the challenges that have come to light in our survey, our research has also shown that the overall navigability of the emergency food landscape is of critical concern to halal-observant community members. We identified the need for a more comprehensive reference for halal food offering pantries for our staff, our clients and for the wider public.

This calls for additional research on the part of state actors like the New York State Office of General Services Division of Food Distribution to track and release information on halal food distribution to food banks and pantries in New York City and around the state, while also tracking and maintaining up-to-date information about those sites. The [food map of halal pantries](#) generated by AAFSC as a component of this research project is a step towards making such a resource available; however, due to the limitations of our sample, a more comprehensive list can be produced through larger scale research and data collection efforts.

Increased funding would also improve access to and distribution of halal food. First, there is an urgent need to allocate further resources to emergency food organizations and initiatives in response to the widespread need for halal food, enabling more flexibility for food pantry operators to spend funds in a manner that satisfies the dietary needs of their communities. Our research demonstrates the necessity of efforts undertaken by the Met Council of New York, who, in addition to enhancing halal food access within its network of food pantries, has called for New York officials to allocate at least 20% of the food in Get Food NYC, a program meant to support food pantries in the city, as kosher and halal (Met Council, 2021). Second, this research also points to the ways in which long-term, sustained interventions, such as SNAP, are potentially more beneficial for halal-observant community members, as they provide families with more agency of choice and autonomy over their diet and nourishment. As such, it is necessary to increase maximum SNAP benefit allowances to not only account for the higher cost of various religious and medical dietary constraints, but also for the rising overall cost of food in New York City.

CONCLUSION

AAFSC recognizes that food is at the center of health, well-being, and identity. As NYC continues to grapple with the lingering impact of COVID-19, including increased food and economic insecurity in vulnerable communities, AAFSC is committed to shifting conversations about food access to incorporate the voices of our immigrant and refugee communities more equitably. Informed by these findings, AAFSC has strengthened strategic partnerships with local food distribution and nutritional health organizations and expanded our capacity to incorporate food distribution into our suite of direct service and outreach programming. These efforts are conducted in a manner responsive to client feedback and serve to expand knowledge and capacity city-wide. We call upon our partners, city leaders, stakeholders, and lawmakers to join us in expanding the true meaning of food security for all New Yorkers.



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