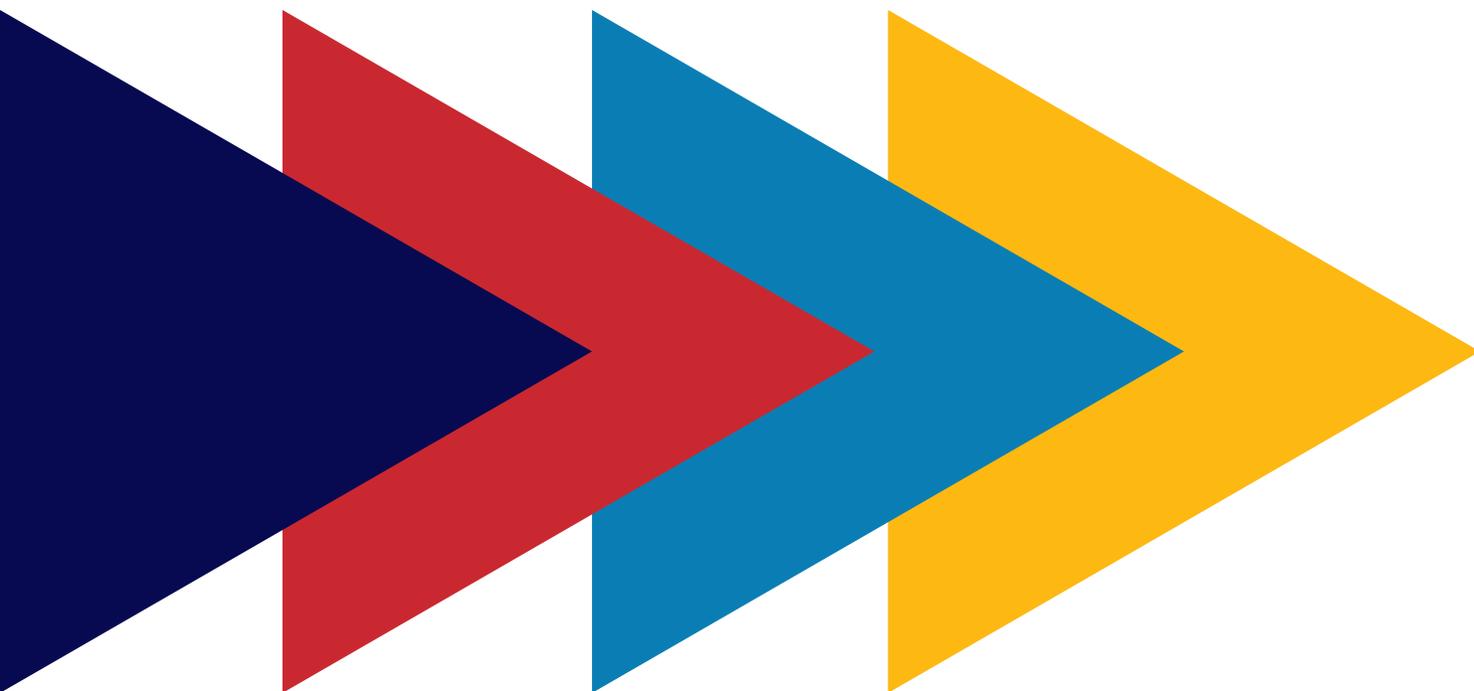


**COVID-19 in the South Bronx:
What We've Learned and How We Move Forward**
Bronx Community District 3 Findings & Recommendations

South Bronx Rising Together
February 2021



COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Background & Context



South Bronx Rising Together (SBRT) is a community-wide effort composed of more than 150 cross-sector partners committed to building pathways to success “from cradle-through-college-and-career”. We employ data-driven decision making to align efforts, leverage resources, and create an easily-navigable continuum of care in Bronx Community District 3 (CD3), our target geographic region.

In October 2020, SBRT developed a common needs assessment in partnership with education advocates representing students in the South Bronx. The purpose of this report is to more fully understand the barriers students and their families have faced during the COVID-19 public health crisis. **This analysis focuses on responses from families living in zip codes that overlap with Bronx Community District 3.** Analytic support was provided by our partners at the Citizens' Committee for Children. The policy recommendations in this report were developed by SBRT partners with expertise in each associated content area and reflect ongoing state and local advocacy efforts.

We are grateful to the following partners who contributed to the process of designing and refining the assessment:

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COVID-19 in the South Bronx

General Overview | Bronx



In October 2020, South Bronx Rising Together (SBRT) launched a common needs assessment to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on families with children. The assessment was open to any NYC parent/caregiver and focused on **online learning, child care, food access, housing stability, and mental health**. 275 parents and caregivers completed the assessment, representing 437 NYC school students. 51% of respondents were from the Bronx, half of whom live under the federal poverty level. This report summarizes findings from the 141 responses we received from Bronx caregivers.



Half of Bronx families reported living under the federal poverty level.

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Over half of Bronx families do not have reliable internet for online learning.

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1 in 5 Bronx households were without adequate child care for their family.

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Nearly 3 in 4 Bronx households have been worried about having enough food.

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Almost 2 in 5 Bronx households were worried about paying next month's rent.

When NYC Schools transitioned to online learning in March 2020, the Department of Education provided caregivers the option of choosing hybrid or entirely remote forms of learning for their children. **71% of Bronx caregivers expressed worry about sending their children back to school.**

As families adjusted to online learning, many felt disconnected from school supports. **Very few Bronx households reported having an understanding of schools' expectations for participation, assignments, and knowing about resources to help with remote learning.**

Prior to the pandemic, **32% of Bronx households spent over half of their income on rent.** To make matters worse, the pandemic's economic devastation has created a housing crisis. **Almost 40% of Bronx families worry about making next month's rent.** Even with rent relief on its way to New Yorkers, the ambiguities surrounding its distribution have left many families in limbo.

We know social isolation has negative consequences for mental health and as most therapy options have transitioned to teletherapy, connecting honestly with mental health professionals has become increasingly difficult in small, shared spaces. **Caregivers indicated they felt uncomfortable with virtual therapy and that finding someone who looked like them and spoke their language was a barrier.**

Food insecurity has proven to be a lasting issue in the wake of the pandemic. **34% of Bronx households who accessed free groceries were not provided with religious or culturally-appropriate food.** Additionally, **65% of households were not completely satisfied with the quality of the food they received.**



COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Online Learning | Bronx Community District 3



Over half of households in CD3 opted for 100% remote learning.

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In CD3, nearly 1 in 2 households reported they did not have good internet connection.

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Nearly 1 in 2 households in CD3 reported not having a learning device that was reliable and updated.

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Under 1 in 3 CD3 households reported positive learning experiences for their children.

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1 in 5 children who receive language or disability services were not able to access them remotely.

Nearly all NYC students are participating in some form of remote learning, presenting a new set of challenges for both schools and families. Thousands of students in the Bronx, primarily students of color from low-income backgrounds, are once again disproportionately affected by the inequitable implementation of digital support in the NYC school system. Having a reliable internet connection, an updated digital device, and a quiet space to learn are now more essential than ever for students. Unfortunately, not every child is afforded these tools.

59% of CD3 caregivers reported a need for better technical support and 37% desired more interaction with teachers through remote learning. Additionally, 40% of caregivers reported not understanding school expectations for student participation and assignments online. It remains clear that students and their caregivers are falling through the cracks and are not receiving the essential support they need.

We know that for many families school plays a vital role beyond education and serves as a lifeline for those who need access to additional resources. Nearly 25% of CD3 households reported both child and parent did not have a trusted adult at their school. Similarly, Spanish speaking households city-wide were less likely to report having a trusted adult at their child's school. We cannot expect students and their families to benefit from the additional resources that schools provide, such as mental health support, if they do not have a relationship with adults they trust in schools.

Recommendations

- Provide appropriate digital devices to all students immediately.
- Hold internet services accountable to providing affordable, reliable internet options.
- Improve communication to families about device distribution and other technology support.
- Increase resources for technology assistance for students and families, including increased staffing and creating a more efficient system for ticket submission and tracking.
- Ensure the quality of remote learning.



COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Mental Health | Bronx Community District 3



An August 2020 survey conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that 1 in 4 young adults said they have experienced suicidal thoughts or ideation—a 15% rise since 2018. The same survey revealed 75% of young adults are struggling with at least one mental health problem.

It is no surprise the implications of a pandemic have taken a toll on everyone. From forced isolation to family deaths, many mental health professionals see this time as traumatic for all who are living through it. When asked if anyone from their household has looked for either formal or informal mental health support since March 2020, 77% of CD3 households said no one had. These numbers prove to be consistent across the borough and city.



Almost 4 in 5 CD3 households had not looked for mental health support since March 2020.

The most commonly cited barriers to accessing mental health support were not knowing where to find support, not feeling comfortable with virtual support, and not being able to find a mental health professional who shares a similar language, culture, or background. Caregivers indicated the top two ways they were finding support were by talking with loved ones and meditating.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, nearly 25% of CD3 households reported both child and parent did not have a trusted adult at their school. Schools play a large role in providing mental health services to students and their families. The more connected households feel to their schools, the more likely they are able to build a mental health safety net and access resources they need.

Recommendations



- Extend the operating hours for mental health services to enable individuals with non-traditional schedules to access services.
- Ensure mental health staff at schools are able to meet the language needs of their students and families by employing bilingual guidance counselors and social workers.
- Expand current education and campaigning conducted by schools about the importance of mental health.
- Launch a city-wide campaign on mental health to destigmatize talking about mental health and normalize seeking out support.
- Increase the number of student support staff, such as guidance counselors, in NYC schools.

COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Child Care | Bronx Community District 3



Child care providers play a crucial role in supporting young children, families, and communities. Without affordable care, caregivers are often unable to access or maintain employment, leaving their families in financial crisis. The education afforded to young children in child care settings is also critical to healthy development. For school-age children, child care providers serve as supplemental education support by helping students complete their homework and providing spaces where students can learn outside of the classroom.

With K-12 students required to attend school virtually, primary caregivers were burdened with the unexpected duty of caring for school age children at home during normal school hours. In response to heightened demand for school-age child care, the NYC DOE promised day care slots to families in need. **Less than 2% of caregivers reported receiving a DOE slot while nearly 15% of caregivers were still waiting for the DOE to issue them a slot.**

More than 1 in 5 CD3 households indicated they were without adequate care for their school-age children.



Prior to 2020, CD3 households sending their children to center-based child care spent 65% of their income on child care. For those using family child care settings—which account for 80% of child care settings in the Bronx—households spent 36% of their income on child care. While all families benefit from the child care system, Black, Latinx, immigrant, and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted by the cost burden, further exacerbating education inequities. Perhaps as a result of the high cost of child care, 56% of CD3 households indicated they were using at-home (with a friend/family member in their home) or in-home (with a sibling or household member) care for their school-age children.

In a 2020 survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 29% of New York child care providers said they would have to close within 3 months. The number of family child care providers has slowly declined throughout the years and we anticipate an even sharper drop when 2020 data is released. The challenges experienced by child care providers undoubtedly impact the accessibility of reliable and affordable care. The child care crisis families and providers were in the midst of well before COVID-19 has only taken a turn for the worse in 2020.

Recommendations



- Expand equitable access to federal relief and benefits to family child care providers.
- Provide both timely and appropriate translation of all city, state, and federal provider documents.
- Expand eligibility requirements and reform child care reimbursement rates to reflect the cost of care.
- Create affordable and sustainable pathways for child care providers to offer infant slots.

COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Food Access | Bronx Community District 3



Prior to 2020, nearly 20% of Bronx children experienced food insecurity. As the COVID-19 virus began to surge in the city, advocates estimated food insecurity would rise to 38% city-wide. Between economic hardship and disrupted access to meals normally consumed during the school day, food insecurity has become one of the most devastating consequences of the pandemic.

While CD3 households reported slightly lower levels of food insecurity than the rest of the city, families are still struggling—35% of households reported worrying about their ability to afford enough food. City-wide, we saw food insecurity reported highest among Spanish-speaking households and families with children in Pre-K and elementary school. 54% of CD3 households accessed free food at least once since March 2020. Of those families, the majority were provided with child-friendly options and food that suited dietary and religious preferences. However, when it comes to critical issues of quality and quantity we see that many households were unsatisfied.



Nearly 3 in 5 households who accessed free food were not completely satisfied with the **quantity** they were provided.



Nearly 4 in 5 households who accessed free food were not completely satisfied with the **quality** of food they were provided.

Recommendations



- Increase the nutritional value and cultural appropriateness of available resources for retail and emergency food and nutrition.
 - Increase access to fresh, whole, and unprepared ingredients.
 - Ensure the cultural appropriateness and usability of ingredients provided.
 - Increase the NYC school food budget to purchase fresh foods from local and regional farms.
- Work to impact the overall food system infrastructure to promote the availability of affordable, high quality fresh produce, particularly in the emergency food supply and in communities that rely on nutrition supports.
 - Expand SNAP acceptance by subsidizing terminal and transaction fees and seeking waivers as needed.
 - Ensure p-EBT is maximized and accessible to all eligible families.

*These recommendations are from the Bronx Impact Food Access Collective, a group of advocates who believe all Bronx residents deserve food justice, including equitable local access to affordable, fresh, nutritious, culturally relevant choices. Find the full, detailed list of recommendations [here](#).

COVID-19 in the South Bronx

Housing Stability | Bronx Community District 3



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the combination of increased unemployment and preexisting rent burden has caused many families across the country to fear eviction. Though New York State placed a moratorium on residential evictions through April 2021 for tenants who endured hardship related to the pandemic, uncertainty remains.

Families and students residing in a living situation other than their own apartment or house face an additional set of challenges. How can a family seek stable housing when caregivers are out of work? The pandemic has certainly upended the housing sector. **43% of CD3 households who indicated they lived in some form of temporary housing were not in that living situation prior to March 2020**, suggesting their temporary housing situation is a result of the pandemic.

Though households in CD3 reported better housing security outcomes compared to the rest of the city, struggle remains. **26% of households were not confident they would be able to afford their next rent or mortgage payment** compared to 48% city-wide. For households in poverty, almost half of respondents say they were not confident they would make payments on time.



1 in 4 CD3 households were not confident they could afford next month's rent or mortgage payment.

In 2019, almost 40% of households in CD3 spent 50% or more of their income on rent, making CD3 the community district with the highest percentage of residents experiencing severe rent burden in the city. On a borough level, severe rent burden has slowly decreased the past few years, but CD3 has seen a gradual increase since 2015. Even with federal and state relief, CD3 is in a uniquely difficult position when it comes to affordable housing.

The Bronx is also home to nearly 40,000 students living in temporary housing, including but not limited to shelters. A stable and safe home environment is pivotal to a student's learning experience and with students learning remotely, this becomes even more complicated for students in temporary housing. Without affordable and stable housing options, CD3 families continue to be put at a disadvantage.

Recommendations

- Extend the Tenant Safe Harbor Act until, at the very least, the end of 2021 and provide rent forgiveness.
- Suspend mortgage payments for small landlords who are unable to afford their payments.
- Increase knowledge about Right to Counsel and expand the income eligibility for qualifying households to 400% of the federal poverty line.
- Hold landlords accountable for violations and mistreatment of tenants.



