

Restaurant Grading in New York City at 18 Months



Public Recognition and Use of Grades

Trends in Restaurant Sanitary Conditions and Foodborne Illnesses

Introduction

In July 2010, the Health Department began requiring restaurants in all five boroughs to post letter grades summarizing their sanitary inspection scores to help achieve three goals: to inform the public about a restaurant's inspection results in a simple, accessible way; to improve sanitary conditions and food safety practices in restaurants; and to reduce illnesses associated with dining out. This report summarizes progress toward these goals.

Why the Health Department Inspects and Grades Restaurants

Research has demonstrated that most bacterial, viral and contaminant-based foodborne illnesses occur because of poor hygiene, improper storage and handling, and inadequate cooling and heating of food. The Health Department requires restaurants to follow food safety rules that are grounded in science and based on federal and state guidelines and laws. The most important rules require restaurant workers to:

- Wash hands before touching food
- Keep cold food cold and hot food hot to stop the growth of dangerous bacteria
- Avoid cross-contamination by preventing contact between raw meats like beef, poultry and fish and food that will not be cooked
- Prevent infestations of mice, filth flies, roaches and other pests by maintaining clean spaces, sealing holes and cracks, and using properly licensed and trained exterminators
- Prepare food on surfaces that are made of appropriate material and are well maintained so that toxic chemicals, mold and other harmful substances do not touch food
- Have a supervisor trained in food protection present at all times to oversee operations

When a restaurant fails to follow these and other basic food safety practices, patrons are more likely to become sick. New Yorkers eat at restaurants nearly a billion times each year. While most do not get sick, foodborne bacteria, viruses and other contaminants cause millions of cases of illness each year. We estimate that more than 6,000 New Yorkers are hospitalized and 20,000 visit emergency rooms each year because of foodborne illnesses. Each year, the City receives approximately 2,700 complaints about restaurant-acquired foodborne illnesses — many involving more than one person — and another 3,000 complaints about restaurant hygiene. Research in New York City and elsewhere has shown that restaurants with poorer inspection results are more likely to be associated with outbreaks of illness. The Health Department compared inspections at restaurants where a foodborne illness outbreak was investigated to those citywide and found that restaurants where outbreaks had occurred score, on average, nine more points on recent inspections than those without outbreaks.

Before letter grading, restaurants were motivated to practice food safety by their own desire to maintain healthful conditions and by the threat of fines for violations found at the time of inspection. Grading introduced a third and potentially more significant incentive: recognition with an A grade for excellent food safety practices.

How the Grading System Works

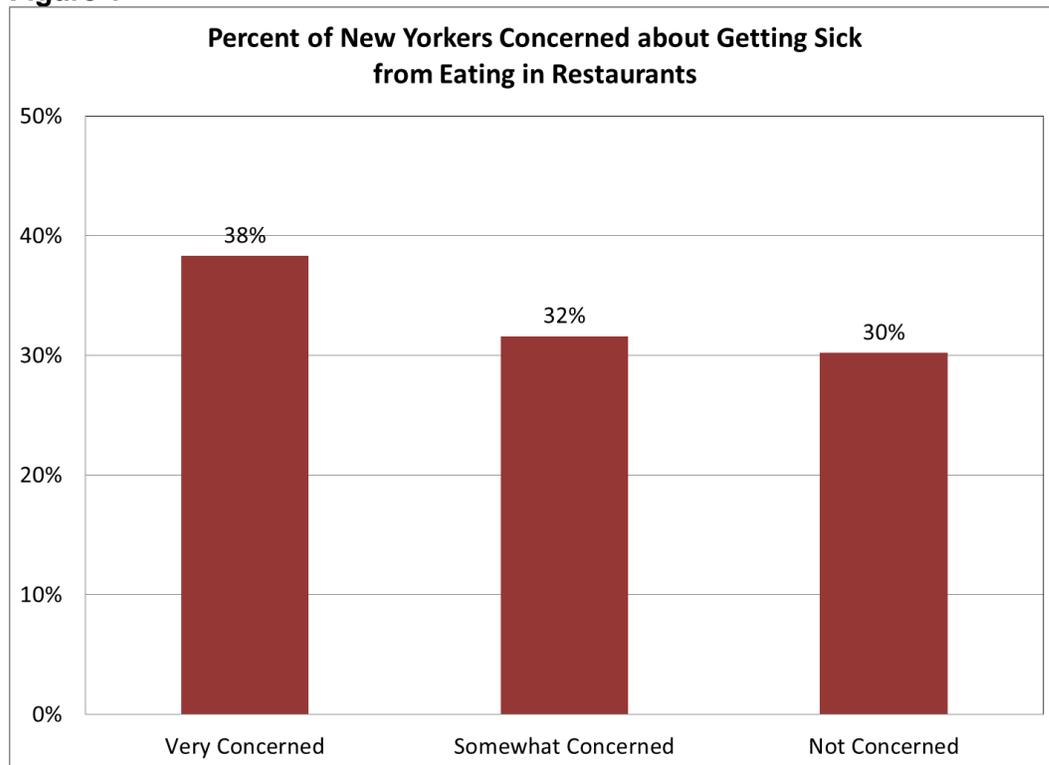
In the letter-grading program, restaurant inspection results are summarized by grades of A, B or C. The program uses dual inspections to help restaurants improve their food-safety practices before they are graded. If a restaurant does not earn an A on its first inspection (called an “initial inspection”), the Health Department does not issue a grade. Instead, it conducts a second inspection (called a “re-inspection”) approximately a month later and issues a grade based on this

re-inspection. This series of inspections is called a “cycle.” Each health code violation results in points; total points are a restaurant’s inspection score. Restaurants with 0 to 13 points earn A grades, 14 to 27 points earn Bs and 28 or more points get Cs. Restaurants that score in the B or C range on their initial inspection begin a new cycle of inspections sooner. Those earning 0 to 13 points on their initial inspection start a new cycle in approximately 12 months, while those scoring 14 to 27 or 28 or more points begin a new cycle in approximately six months and four months, respectively.

More New Yorkers See and Use Grades When They Eat Out

In late January and early February 2012, Baruch College Survey Research conducted the second survey of New Yorkers as part of a comprehensive evaluation of restaurant grading. The survey consisted of a random sample of 511 adult New Yorkers contacted by telephone. Among New York City adults, 81 percent report seeing the letter grades in restaurant windows, and 88 percent consider the grades in their dining decisions. As many as 70 percent of New Yorkers express concern about getting sick from eating out in restaurants, delis and coffee shops, with 38 percent being very concerned (Figure 1).

Figure 1



The presence of grades in windows provides diners a measure of reassurance. Seeing an A in the window of a restaurant makes 76 percent of New Yorkers feel more confident about the safety of eating at that restaurant. Many believe the Health Department inspects restaurants more frequently than it does (21 percent believe that restaurants are inspected four or more times per year), and 88 percent approve of the Department inspecting poorly performing restaurants more frequently.

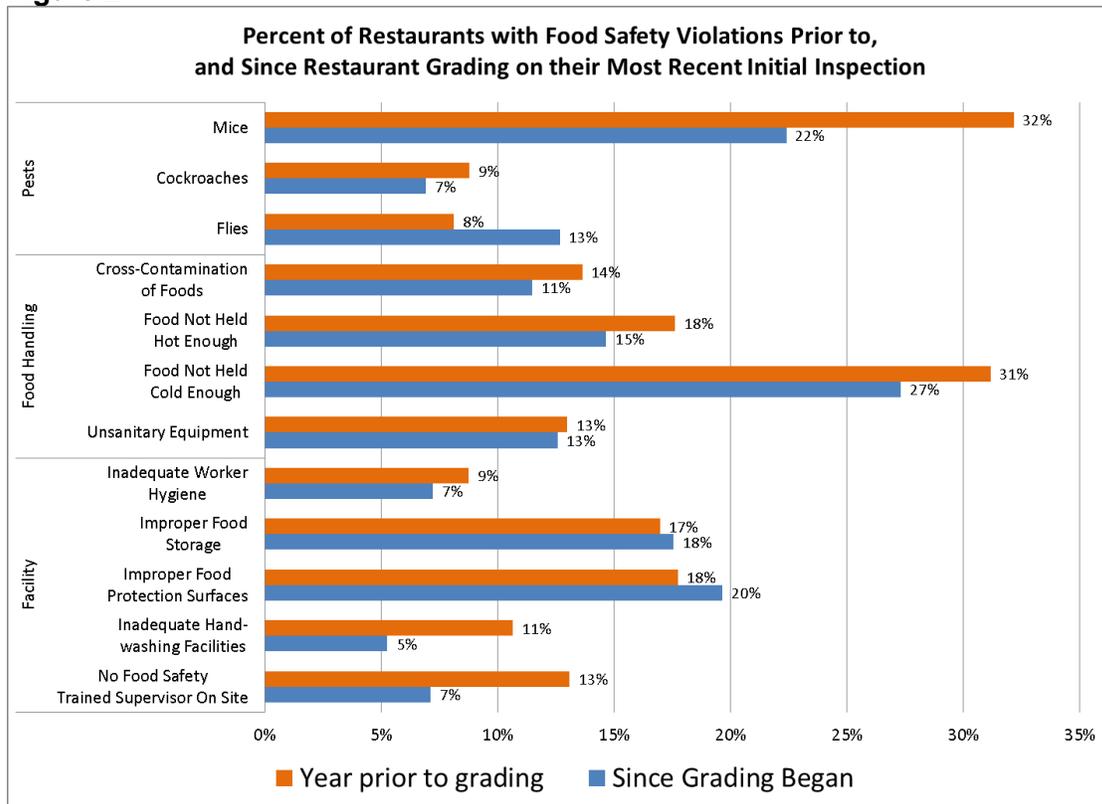
Grading Has Led to Significant Improvements in Restaurant Sanitary Practices

Fewer Restaurants Have Violations Associated with Foodborne Illnesses

To gauge the overall progress in the grading program, the Health Department assessed the change over time in the percent of all restaurants with specific violations on initial unannounced inspections (Figure 2). We found that many key violations were less prevalent at 18 months than in the year prior to grading. For instance:

- The percent of restaurants without a trained food protection supervisor on site has decreased from 13 percent before the program to 7 percent today. Restaurants without trained supervisors on duty are far more likely to have other sanitary and food practice violations.
- Restaurants are more likely to hold hot and cold food at safe temperatures since grading began.
- While 22 percent of restaurants still have signs of mice on initial inspection, this is a nearly one third improvement since before grading began, when 32 percent of restaurants had mice.
- Only 5 percent of initial inspections found inadequate hand washing facilities, compared with 11 percent prior to grading.

Figure 2



Not all areas saw improvement, however. Inspections noting dirty food preparation surfaces increased slightly, from 18 percent before grading to 20 percent since grading began.

More Restaurants Earn A Grades on Initial Inspections, Require Less Frequent Inspections and Avoid Fines

The proportion of restaurants earning A grades on their initial inspections has steadily risen over the last 18 months (Figure 3). As of January 2012, 41 percent of all initial inspections resulted in an A grade, up from 27 percent in the first six months of grading and 35 percent after a year. As a result, these restaurants will be inspected again in 12 months rather than sooner.

Figure 3



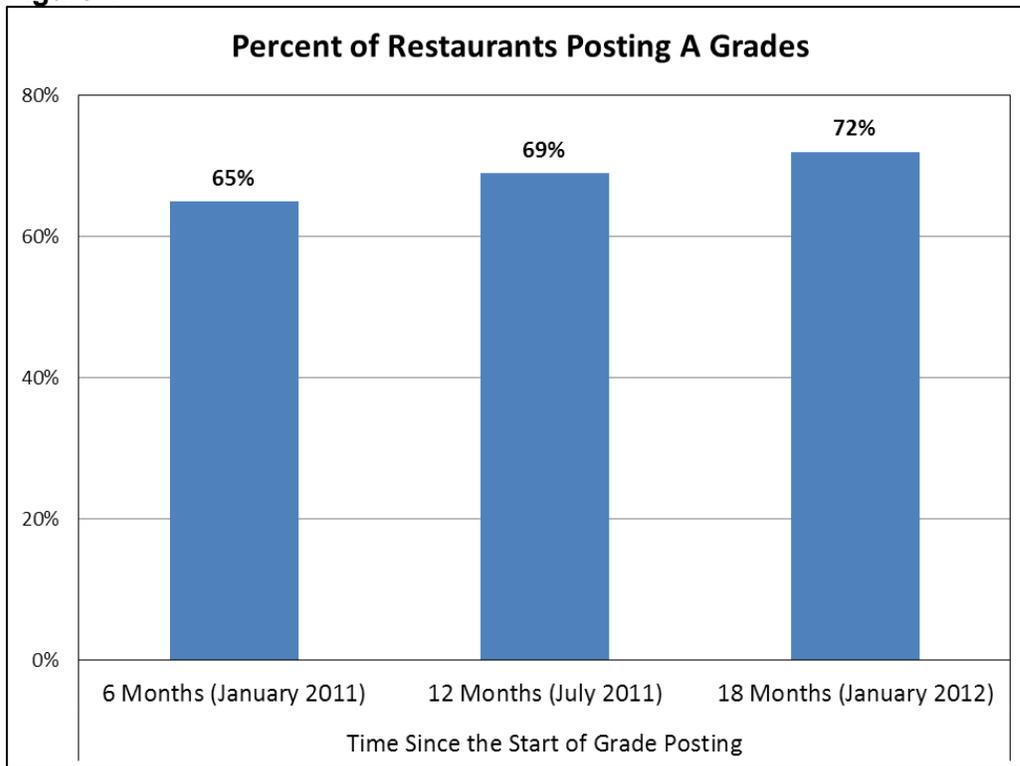
The number of restaurants that are inspected more frequently has fallen as well. As of January 2012, just 25 percent of restaurants were on a schedule to be inspected three times a year, down from 32 percent six months ago.

Because of improved sanitary conditions in restaurants, more restaurants pay no fines. In addition, in January 2011 the Health Department instituted a policy of not assessing fines for any restaurant earning an A on initial or re-inspection. As a result of the policy change and improved inspection results, 41 percent of restaurants will pay no fines this year, up from 19 percent in the year before grading began.

Restaurants Are Earning Better Grades through the Inspection Cycle

Diners across the city have more A-grade restaurants to choose from than they did six months ago and many more than a year ago. As of January 2012, 72 percent of restaurants were posting A grades, up from 69 percent in July 2011 and 65 percent in January 2011 (Figure 4).

Figure 4

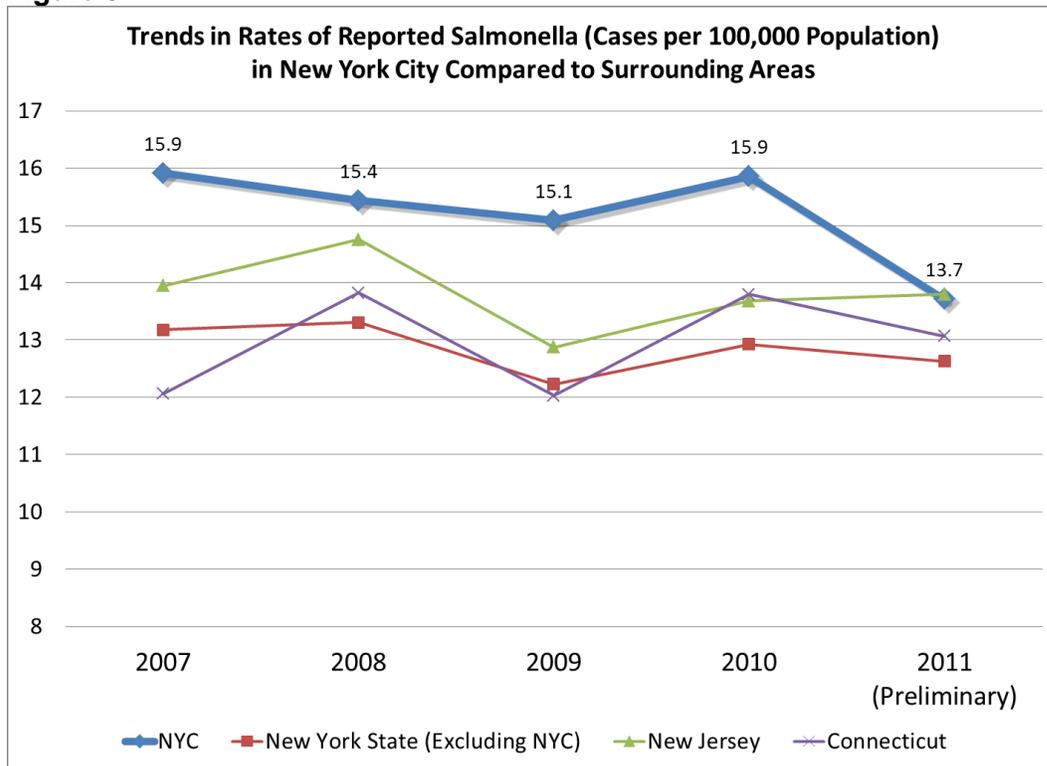


Salmonella Infections Have Declined Since Letter Grading Was Implemented

When restaurants use good food safety practices, diners are safer. Early signs suggest that the combination of letter grade posting and more frequent inspections at restaurants posing the greatest risk to the public may be leading to a reduction in foodborne illnesses.

The annual number of infections caused by *Salmonella* bacteria is a common and useful indicator of trends in food-related illnesses because they occur relatively frequently and because approximately 95 percent of these infections are believed to be caused by eating contaminated food. By law, laboratories must report *Salmonella* cases to the New York State and City Health Departments. In 2011, the first full year since grading took effect, reported cases of *Salmonella* infections fell by 175 cases, a 14 percent decline from the previous year, to a level lower than that seen in New York City for at least 20 years. No decrease approached this magnitude in the rest of the state, Connecticut or New Jersey in 2011 (Figure 5). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that for every reported case of *Salmonella*, an additional 28 cases are not diagnosed because ill people do not seek medical care or physicians do not test them for *Salmonella*. Using this formula, the decline in cases in New York City from 2010 to 2011 represents a reduction of an estimated 5,075 cases of *Salmonella* infections.

Figure 5



More Progress in Food Safety Practices is Necessary to Further Protect New Yorkers

Restaurant sanitary practices have improved citywide since the start of the grading program. But some restaurants need to make further improvements to meet the high standards set by an A grade. Inspections still:

- Find evidence of mice in 22 percent of city restaurants
- Measure cold food at excessively warm temperatures in 27 percent of restaurants
- Uncover the potential for cross-contamination of food by contact with raw ingredients such as poultry and other meats in 11 percent of restaurants
- Observe food being prepared on dirty or greasy surfaces 20 percent of the time

The Health Department expects that, over time, with an A grade as incentive and more frequent inspections to monitor and educate poorer-performing restaurant operators, these conditions will continue to improve and rates of foodborne illnesses will continue to decline, making dining out cleaner and safer.



Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor

Thomas Farley, MD MPH
Commissioner