

Restaurant Inspection Ratings

“No wonder New Yorkers support restaurant grades. The proof is in the pudding, and more than ever the pudding is being prepared according to the highest food-safety standards.”

-NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, 2012



WHAT ARE RESTAURANT INSPECTION RATINGS?

Cities with restaurant inspection ratings policies require all food establishments to post food safety inspection grade cards in outside windows or at the point of entry. This information empowers customers to make informed decisions before patronizing a restaurant, and can reduce the odds of foodborne illness.

HOW DO PUBLIC RESTAURANT RATINGS IMPROVE THE LIVES OF BIG CITY RESIDENTS?

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), almost half the money Americans spend on food is at restaurants. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least half of foodborne-disease outbreaks occur at restaurants and commercial [eating establishments](#). Every year, foodborne illness sickens one in six Americans, [hospitalizes 128,000, and kills 3,000](#). According to the US Department of Agriculture, foodborne illnesses in the United States cost more than [\\$15.6 billion annually](#).

Inspecting the sanitary practices at food establishments is a core function of local health departments. Traditionally based on a pass/fail system, inspections look for issues ranging from safe refrigeration to pest management. Local agencies with strong food safety inspection programs have [fewer food borne illnesses](#).

Select cities across the country have innovated by passing mandatory ratings –letter or number grades for different levels of performance –posted for a consumer to see before entering the establishment. These ‘grades’ are intended to put more information in the hands of consumers, and thereby motivate restaurants to improve hygiene and reduce sickness.

Restaurants with higher food inspection ratings can expect increased revenue, while those with lower ratings lose out. Shortly after letter grades started in Los Angeles, A-rated restaurants earned an average of 5.7% more revenue than before 1998, while revenue among B-rated restaurants remained flat, and [dropped by 1% for C-rated establishments](#).



WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THAT RESTAURANT RATING POLICIES WORK?

Research shows public grading spurs better compliance with hygiene standards. According to two different studies, only one out of four LA County restaurants would have earned an “A” prior to 1998, while more than 50 percent did in the first year letter grades went into effect. Similarly, restaurant letter grading in New York City has resulted in improved sanitary conditions on unannounced inspection.

Following passage of public grading systems, Los Angeles and New York City saw as much as a twenty percent reduction in foodborne illness hospitalizations—a decrease sustained in subsequent years.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE POLICY IMPROVEMENT

Having publicly available scores empowers consumers and incentivizes restaurants to aim for the highest food safety standards consistently. Government agencies should move toward greater access of rating information, such as posting data via the Internet, allowing links to non-governmental websites, and sharing trends observed in the data collected. In addition, the quality of the inspection system is only as good as the training, frequency, and risk-based inspection schedule established by the governmental agency. Often, budget restrictions hamper robust inspection and enforcement.

RESOURCES FOR CITIES ON IMPLEMENTING COMPLETE STREETS POLICIES

[L.A. Grading and Posting Requirements for Food Facilities](#)