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Focus Group Summary Report

Consumer Attitudes towards Food and Nutrition in Low-Income Communities

Conducted For:



New York City November 28, 2006 and January 23, 2007

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC) commissioned qualitative research to provide insight into how families in two low-income neighborhoods make food choices.

CCC was interested in using the groups to test policy recommendations and measure consumer demand and interest in healthy, affordable food in the context of what they experience in their local neighborhood.

Two one-hour focus groups were held on two different evenings with childcare and dinner provided to participants free of charge. The first focus group was held in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx on November 28, 2006 and a second focus group was conducted in Red Hook, Brooklyn on January 23, 2007. A total of twenty-nine persons participated in both focus groups. Of these participants, twenty-six were interviewed individually before the focus groups began. Except for two participants, all were under the age of 45. All had children under the age of 19.

Two community-based organizations recruited the twenty-nine participants. The East Side House Settlement, a settlement house that provides a range of direct services to children, families, and seniors, recruited twenty-four participants in Mott Haven. Good Shepherd Services, a child welfare and youth services agency, recruited five focus group participants in Red Hook.

Participants were aware of the name of the organization sponsoring the focus group but were not made aware explicitly of the specific purpose of the research.

Topics covered included:

- Quality, availability and affordability of food at existing food retail options in the neighborhood (e.g. grocery stores, bodegas, restaurants, street vendors)
- Spending on food and food shopping preferences
- Eating habits and preferences (e.g. cooking at home, take-out, food preferences)
- Health issues in the community
- Reactions to policy alternatives that could increase access to affordable, healthy food in their communities.

Prior to the start of the group discussion, participants also filled out a written survey that provided demographic and socioeconomic information as well as answers on a range of questions regarding their individual food choices and grocery shopping habits and preferences.

KEY FINDINGS

Grocery Shopping

Mott Haven participants believe that the food in their neighborhood is affordable but that the quality is unacceptable. On the other hand, Red Hook participants believe that the quality of the food in their neighborhood is good, but too expensive.

In Mott Haven, half of the participants said they do monthly or bi-monthly grocery purchases at stores outside of their community where there is a better selection of food at reasonable prices. Because none of the Mott Haven participants has access to a private car, they rely on public transportation or car service to travel to and from the grocery store. They buy at the local grocery stores for smaller purchases or when they cannot travel to a preferred grocery store. All participants agreed that the produce at their local neighborhood stores (Pioneer, C-Town and Western Beef) spoils quickly, the beef tends to be “brown,” the chicken tends to be “broken,” and cans are often dented. In addition, they mentioned that although a farmers’ market comes to the neighborhood once a week (except for the winter months), it is very small and runs out of produce quickly.

In Red Hook, three out of five participants said they take some sort of transportation once a month to shop for groceries. While there is a Fairway in the neighborhood and participants were highly complimentary of the quality of the food there, none shop there because they find it “too expensive” and “intimidating.” One person stated that he had ventured to shop at Fairway when it opened last summer and ended up spending \$200 instead of the \$120 he usually spends elsewhere. In addition, all five participants said that they routinely shop for sales at their neighborhood stores (Fairway and Pathmark) and agreed that these offer competitive prices but the quality of the food is sub par and spoils quickly.

In Mott Haven residents spoke of traveling to Manhattan – especially to the Pathmark and Fairway – to get “good vegetables” and low-fat dairy products, but like their counterparts in Red Hook, expressed concern about the high costs of food. In Mott Haven they also expressed concerns about the added transportation costs when they shop at groceries that are not within walking distance.

Although participants in both neighborhoods said they often make small purchases at bodegas/corner stores, they were critical of the bodegas’ marked-up prices and their small food selection. Many also mentioned that they do not carry fresh fruits or vegetables.

In Mott Haven, participants expressed a desire for a better selection of nutritious food in their neighborhood at affordable prices. In Red Hook, where there is a Fairway that offers a wide selection of fresh food, participants expressed a desire for reasonable food prices.

In Mott Haven, residents expressed interest in food co-ops and food buying clubs (e.g. Community Supported Agriculture). They had mixed emotions about their neighborhood farmers' market but protested that it is not open year-round and offers a very small supply of produce. Red Hook also has a farmers' market and during the individual interviews, two of the five participants stated that they buy produce at their when it comes to the neighborhood.

In the written surveys, most participants reported spending \$151 - \$300 monthly on groceries. A smaller group reported spending more – some spending up to \$600 a month.

Eating In v. Eating Out

During the individual interviews, participants in both focus groups stated that they regularly cook at home on a daily basis but that they sometimes treat their families to take-out food or to a restaurant. When eating out or buying take home food, people in both neighborhoods usually frequent Chinese food or fast food places in the neighborhood (e.g. McDonald's, pizza and fried chicken).

People in both communities said they eat out for reasons common to other New Yorkers. Some residents spoke of eating out to “treat the kids” or for “special occasions.” Another mother stated that she orders take-out food “when I don't feel like cooking”. All statements received nods from the other participants.

In Mott Haven, close to three-quarters of the participants (15 out of 21) stated that they eat out/buy take-out food ranging from once every two months to once a week,¹ while the remaining participants said they eat out two or three times a week. In Red Hook, participants reported they cook at home every day and that they eat out or buy take-out once a week.

Getting Kids to Eat Healthy

When asked whether they had consumed fruits or vegetables on the day the focus group was conducted, close to three quarters (eighteen of twenty six) had stated that they had, and twenty said their kids had eaten fruits or vegetables on that day. Regardless of whether participants answered these questions

¹ Breakdown: Three eat out at least every two months; five eat out twice a month, and seven eat out once a week.

truthfully, their responses suggest that they are aware that eating fruits and vegetables is desirable and that they should be eating these things every day.

In addition, participants in Mott Haven identified the following barriers to consuming more quantities of fresh foods and vegetables: "fresh produce spoils quickly," "some kids like fresh fruits and vegetables and some don't," and a general lack of availability. In Red Hook, participants stated they needed "lower prices." One participant who works at Mc Donald's and eats there daily stated that he needs to "learn to eat healthier foods."

In Mott Haven, the obstacle to getting kids to eat healthier seemed to be the lack of good quality fresh food in their neighborhood. In Red Hook, the issue was one of affordability. Across the board the availability of good quality food and reasonable prices resurfaced. Echoing the earlier conversation on lack of quality fruits and vegetables at local grocery stores within participants' price range – lack of quality affordable supply limited what parents could provide their children. There also seem to be consensus about frozen fruits being unpalatable, with one participant in Red Hook asking if frozen fruits were healthy or not. . In the case of vegetables, most people stated that they buy frozen and/or canned.

Taste was also an issue. Widespread and lively conversation ensued among parents in both groups on the question of whether kids generally like to eat fruits and vegetables, and most believed that it varies from child to child. Many agreed with the statement offered in Mott Haven that kids need to begin from infancy getting accustomed to eating fruits and vegetables. One mother suggested the importance of using seasonings to make vegetables more alluring. One person said that parents needed to do a better job modeling healthy eating for their children, saying: "kids need to see you eating the foods you want them to eat." Another stated that she had learned from one of her children to like broccoli.

Health in My Community

Across the board people think diabetes is a crisis in their community. Some of the older participants reported having diabetes themselves. In Red Hook, many of the participants reported having friends or relatives with the disease. Other illnesses that were mentioned as affecting their communities were hypertension, heart disease, asthma, cancer, tuberculosis and high cholesterol. Tuberculosis was only raised in Mott Haven. All other diseases were raised universally.

Almost everyone agreed that obesity – especially among children – is a major problem. Participants blamed as culprits a lack of exercise, the consumption of fast food, feeding kids formula rather than milk (along those lines one participant in Mott Haven said "kids are still bottle sucking when they're four years old"), and "junk food".

Regarding lack of exercise, some participants believe very strongly that children did not get enough exercise because they spend too much time indoors and with electronic devices such as video games. Others believe it was problematic for kids to have gym class only once a week, and that those playgrounds and recreation centers had limitations. Safety at playgrounds was a real concern voiced in Mott Haven. Participants believe they are safer than they used to be – but still too mixed in ages (adolescents and teenagers scaring or harassing younger children). Participants in Mott Haven believe that their local recreation center is not open frequently enough – for example being closed on weekends. In Red Hook participants believe there are recreational spaces – but that they lack opportunity (“not too many programs for kids”). Two elderly participants complained that kids are “too lazy” and don’t play enough outside.

POLICY OPTIONS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH

Participants in both groups were asked about the relative pluses and minuses of various options to bring healthy, affordable food into their communities.

The facilitator discussed each item in turn and then attempted to synthesize various ideas in order to elicit common perceptions or themes.

- Year round markets (a ‘Mercado’) in an indoor public space. Public housing was used as an example of the type of public space.

Participants in Mott Haven were enthusiastic about this concept with the caveat that it must be both affordable and provide better quality than local food options. People were willing to bear a slight increase in price in order to have access to better produce. Participants in Red Hook were also interested in the idea but with less fervor.

- Creating or expanding local farmers’ markets.

Participants in both groups supported this – but both believe that it is not a year-round solution due to its seasonal nature. In Mott Haven participants complained about the current farmers’ market – especially its small size, limited hours and limited selection. In Red Hook, participants thought it was a good idea but were neutral on whether a farmers’ market or an indoor Mercado would be better.

- Free transportation for you and your groceries home from the supermarket.

Across the board, participants in both groups were wildly enthusiastic about this option. One participant in Mott Haven lamented the need for this option – commenting that good food should be available without

having to travel to get it. Participants were cynical about the prospect of ever bringing healthy affordable food to their own neighborhood.

- Providing grocery delivery to your home.

In Mott Haven, participants stated that the stores in their neighborhood offer home delivery at a charge. It appears that participants were not aware that the question also referred to home delivery from supermarkets in other neighborhoods. In Red Hook, participants did not see this as the issue – they can get their groceries home from Fairway if they could afford them.

- Allowing street food vendors to sell fresh fruit and vegetables in the neighborhood.

Participants in both groups were enthusiastic about this. No one offered any criticism of food quality or price. Concerns centered on the ability of vendors to take EBT cards as payment, and in Red Hook – the vendor's safety. Older participants in Red Hook believed that young people would harass vendors because they have "no respect".

- Improving selection and offerings at bodegas

Across the board participants have negative views of the prices of food at bodegas. People believed that even if bodegas carried fresh produce, that it would be unreasonably expensive. One person mentioned that it would also be hard for bodegas to sell fresh produce since they would need higher turn over.

- Creating a food co-op or buying club program where a farmer would bring a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables for a family of 2-3 people for about \$11-\$15 a week

In both communities there are Community Supported Agriculture programs but participants cited a lack of knowledge about how to join them. "People need to know how to access it." Participants in both communities were enthusiastic about the idea of a food coop where they would work a few hours a month and pay a membership fee in order to get good quality at lower prices. One knew about the food coop in Brooklyn and said the food was fresh, organic and affordable. In both communities this idea had the most resonance and elicited the most enthusiasm of any of the policy options we discussed.

- Open-Ended

Throughout the discussions and specifically at the end, the facilitator encouraged participants to share ideas that they had that had not been mentioned.

In Mott Haven there was widespread agreement that government had to be more aggressive at regulating food quality in their local grocery stores. There was a real sense that someone needed to be keeping watch through regular inspections so that grocery stores would be penalized for trying to sell rotten vegetables and meat.

The issue of quality was not as pervasive in Red Hook. People believed that if they could pay the price – quality was available at Fairway and (secondarily) Pathmark. Participants in Red Hook were more focused on the educational aspects of nutrition and suggested having nutritionists available in stores to help people think about how to eat healthier meals. While some thought this idea was a good one, it did not elicit the same sort of passionate response that the call for regulation of food quality did in Mott Haven.

CONCLUSION

Overall, participants in both focus groups lamented their current food options but were enthusiastic about gaining access to better quality healthy affordable food. While there was not unanimity with regard to the various options, most of those presented were appealing to at least some of the group. Participants understood the many health consequences of an unhealthy diet but were frustrated by their limited access to affordable healthy food. Though no one-size-fits-all solution exists to bring healthy affordable food to New York's diverse neighborhoods, there are a variety of ideas – many of them at low cost to the city – that can generate excitement, absorb consumer demand, and create better health outcomes for New Yorkers.