



Fruit and Vegetable Street Vendors in New York City: Work challenges, arrangements and needs

Focus Group Summary Report

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC) conducted qualitative research to provide insight into the street vending experience of vendors selling fresh fruits and vegetables in New York City.

CCC was interested in acquiring a better understanding of vendors' existing work arrangements and challenges, and their vending needs.

A one-hour focus group was held on the evening of July 24th, 2007 at the Urban Justice Center's Street Vendor Project (UJC/SVP). A total of seven street vendors stationed at four fruits and vegetable carts participated in the focus groups. Of the seven, two work different shifts in a 24-hour cart, and one worked along side the permit holder during the day.

The Street Vendor Project recruited seven participants by phoning their membership and by canvassing the streets in lower Manhattan on July 24th, 2007. Sean Basinski, of the UJC/SVP, facilitated the discussion using questions drafted by CCC (see attachment), while CCC staff took notes. The focus group was held at 8 pm to give vendors enough time to close shop and travel to Street Vendor Project's office in lower Manhattan. All the participants vend in lower Manhattan, from Maiden Lane to 12th Street.

Most participants (five) were not familiar with the organization sponsoring the focus group, CCC, or with the Street Vendor Project. Two of the participants were members of the Street Vendor Project.

Topics covered included:

- Work hours/schedule, cart permits, and work arrangements
- Cart and food storage

- Buying, selling and making a living
- Vending location issues and willingness to relocate

KEY FINDINGS

Work Schedules, cart permits, and work arrangements

Not all street vendors selling fruits and vegetables in the City are permit holders. Rather, some lease their permits (they pay between \$4,000 to \$5,200 for a two-year lease) and others work for the permit holder at a low hourly wage. In the case of our seven participants, one has a cart permit; two lease permits, and four receive hourly wages (of these four, two work alongside their father who leases a cart permit). Only one participant was on DOHMH's cart permit waiting list however all expressed interest in owning a cart permit. In addition, one of the participants who works a shift in a 24-hour food cart complained that the leaseholder tends to use more space than is allowed by law. When he (the participant) arrives in the morning, he needs to make adjustments to reduce the size of the vending area, otherwise he receives a ticket. He explained that the tickets/fines are linked to his vending license, not to the cart permit.

While some fruit and vegetable vendors do business year-round, all of our participants do business 8 to 9 months a year and are usually closed for business during the coldest months (between mid-December and mid-March). Most work 5 days a week (except when it rains) between 8 to 12 hours a day.

Some carts do business 24-hours while others are open for business between 8 to 12 hours a day. Of our seven participants, three worked in carts open for business 24 hours a day.

Cart and food storage

Unless they are open 24 hours a day/seven days a week, food carts need to be stored at night. Of our seven participants, four worked in 24-hour food carts and three¹ have to store their carts nightly in a garage, with costs ranging from \$600 and \$800 a month. While participants mentioned that some vendors make arrangements with a truck to have their carts transported to a garage for \$30/day, all of our participants push their carts to their respective storage facilities.

None of our participants store produce at night. They get rid of all produce by the end of the day by lowering the prices in the afternoon and/or giving away produce free of charge by the time they close.

Buying, selling and making a living

All participants said that they have informal arrangements with individuals who buy produce at Hunt Points on a daily basis and deliver the produce to the vending location

¹ Represents two food carts since one participant works alongside the permit holder during the day.

every morning. Focus group participants stated that they buy approximately \$400 worth of produce a day and sell between \$300 and \$600 a day. Participants agreed they need a minimum daily take home income of \$80 to \$150 per day to make a living.

Vending location issues and willingness to relocate

Participants explained that a good vending location results from a combination of factors:

- Proximity to offices and/or hospitals, and to subway stations;
- Proximity to a garage;
- There was disagreement about whether foot traffic alone makes a location a good vending location. For example, 34 St has lots of foot traffic but people don't buy fruits and vegetables there.

Participants were also asked about vending fresh fruits and vegetables in poor neighborhoods. The more experienced vendors thought there is a market in poor neighborhoods, depending on the location of the cart. However, two of the least experienced vendors (the two who work for their father and have less than one year of experience) were of the opinion that people in poor neighborhoods do not buy fruits and vegetables.

Most of the vendors without a cart permit stated that they would relocate if they had a permit of their own. They stated that they would go to wherever 1) there are people willing to buy; 2) there is a garage nearby.

CONCLUSION

Overall, participants in our focus group wished to obtain a cart permit and for the most part, were willing to relocate to a location that has enough foot traffic to enable them to sell their produce and make a living, and as long as they also have access to a garage to store their cart at night.