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The Food Paradox: How Obesity Commingles With Hunger in Brooklyn

By [Sam Horwich-Scholefield](#) June 15, 2010



Brooklyn neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville and East New York exemplify a surprising food paradox: in the U.S., obesity can commingle with hunger.

It is not uncommon to glimpse long lines outside food pantries and soup kitchens filled with people who suffer from diabetes, hypertension and other chronic diseases brought on by obesity and unhealthy eating habits. According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, three in ten residents in these largely immigrant communities meet the government's standards of obesity, and yet access to supermarkets and fresh produce remains scarce. In 2006, the NYC DOHMH studied access to healthy foods in Bushwick and Bed-Stuy and painted a depressing picture—80% of local food vendors are bodegas, and fewer than one in ten carry any form of leafy greens. In the wealthiest country in the world, people have enough to eat, but the food they want is either too expensive or simply inaccessible.

Advocates have proposed innovative ways to use one of the federal government's most helpful benefits: food stamps—now officially called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. The best way for New York City to promote healthy eating habits in low-income communities is to promote food stamps as a viable option for those in need, and make quality produce readily available to these recipients.

The city recently took a step to extend the number of fruit and vegetable stands (known officially as Green Carts) in areas of New York with limited access to fresh produce. Vendors may apply for permits to sell raw fruits and vegetables like carrots, bananas, apples and tomatoes in central and eastern Brooklyn. The city then works with these vendors to provide low-interest rate loans to finance their Green Carts (the start up costs are around a modest \$3,500-\$5,500), providing affordable produce to people in areas where supermarkets are rare and bodegas stocked with quality produce are rarer still. The program is too new to fully evaluate, but with over 84 carts operating in Brooklyn, Green Carts are helping to improve the situation. Recently a government grant has allowed 15 vendors citywide to install all-weather EBT machines, which allow food-stamp recipients to use their benefits outside of local bodegas and supermarkets. If the program proves successful, food-stamp friendly Green Carts could set a new standard not only in Brooklyn, but also in every produce-starved urban neighborhood in the country.

The sharp rise in unemployment followed by a 12 percent boost from the stimulus bill triggered a surge in the number of people on food stamps in the last few years. In Kings County alone, 33 percent more people took advantage of the SNAP program in 2009 than in 2007. [Articles](#) have called attention to the emergence of food stamp use among groups who traditionally do not rely on public assistance. The number of unemployed people with college degrees has doubled between 2006 and 2009, pushing more educated people into the federal program, now one of the most popular public benefits in the country.

The sudden rise in the popularity of food stamps, especially among the college-educated, has sparked manic outrage among some conservatives responding to the articles. However, many moderates think it's unfair that an unemployed art school graduate uses taxpayer dollars to purchase such items as organic grass-fed beef. But this disapproval belies a basic assumption that many people maintain about food stamps: poor people choose to eat badly, and if you shop for organic foods at Whole Foods you cannot be truly poor.

The growth in the number of people using food stamps to purchase high-quality food is a positive development—the person who uses their allotted SNAP benefits to purchase locally-farmed cheese does not cost the public any more than those who use that same allowance to subsist on Top Ramen and potato chips. A lack of money should not demand acquiescence to an unhealthy diet. Skeptical Americans should remember that one of the greatest obstacles to overcoming poverty—chronic disease—is aggravated by substandard eating habits. The stigma attached to enrolling in a food stamp program is rapidly dissipating, and with good reason. Today almost twice as many Americans—over 33 million—receive SNAP benefits compared to a decade ago. It's dawning on policymakers that this benefit can be a powerful tool in providing more fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income people.

One way to bring healthy wholesome food options to SNAP users is letting people swipe their EBT card at local farmers markets. The City is working with farmers to accomplish this everywhere. Right now Brooklyn is home to 15 EBT-friendly farmers markets, almost all of which are located in the central, eastern and northern parts of the borough. A

program called Health Bucks partly subsidizes the cost of produce at these markets, allowing shoppers to receive \$7 worth of food for every \$5 they charge on their EBT card. New York State has enacted a similar program, issuing coupons to low-income expectant mothers and seniors, which are in turn redeemed at farmers markets. These types of programs make fresh, local produce more affordable and available, and should be applauded for benefiting small farmers and needy families alike.

Another effort allows people to use food stamps to purchase shares in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA members join community-based cooperatives to buy shares of produce from local farmers, which are delivered weekly. Several new programs, such as the brand new Central Brooklyn CSA, offer food stamp users a reduced membership rate, making CSA programs not only EBT-friendly, but attainable for those with a very limited food budget. Members make up for this cost with sweat-equity—they must volunteer four hours per season to help run the distribution program.

Allowing people to pay for membership in CSA programs or for quality produce at farmers markets is not a heavy burden on the public purse. Like most other governments in the U.S., New York City and State are enduring painful budget cuts, but SNAP benefits are paid for with federal dollars. By enrolling more people in the SNAP program, New York is planning for the long term, promoting nutritious foods for low-income Americans.

The next article in the series [Breaking Brooklyn's Eco-Apartheid](#) will look at Brooklyn's community gardens.