



Supermarket Closings in East and Central Harlem:

A report on food justice and food resources



Prepared by

The Supermarkets Committee of the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium*
with recommendations by East & Central Harlem residents

* The Supermarkets Committee of the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium is comprised of representatives from the following organizations: Building Bridges, Building Knowledge, Building Health Coalition; East Harlem Citizens Committee, Healthy Monday Campaign - Mailman School of Public Health, Office of State Senator Jose Serrano, United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1500, West Harlem Environmental Action (WEACT), YMCA of Greater New York, PHC - Harlem.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of all Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium members.

Executive Summary

On September 24, 2008, area residents, food policy advocates, public health advocates and policy makers came together for the Harlem Supermarkets Town Hall meeting. The forum, organized by the Harlem Food and Fitness Consortium, was dedicated to discussing the recent spate of supermarket closures in Harlem, a problem that also affects other low-income communities throughout the city. Through the lens of access to supermarkets, the meeting touched on the broader issues impacting food policy and healthy food access. As the forum made clear, food access is not just about conveniently located supermarkets – it is about the public's health and the tremendous health disparities among NYC neighborhoods; it is city planning and responsible development; it is fair and equitable working conditions for supermarket employees; and it is a coordinated citywide policy that takes into account principles of food justice and community empowerment.

The following report includes barriers to healthy food that were raised at the meeting and recommendations to address them, information about the current policy climate, access to healthy food and health disparities in Harlem, possible sites for supermarkets in Harlem, and a summary of current efforts by government agencies to respond to the scarcity of supermarkets in areas of high need.

The recent widespread concern with food policy indicates that the political climate is ripe for making changes in the way that food is produced and consumed in New York City. This report is an attempt to contribute a crucial voice to this growing discussion: the voice of community residents speaking about the changes that they would like to see in supermarkets and in food access in general.



Ms. Emma Jackson, Community Activist, outside of the newly reopened supermarket at Taft Houses.

The Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium was inspired to address the issue of supermarkets by the activism of Ms. Emma Jackson and the East Harlem Citizens Committee. This is their story.

Community Mobilizes to Bring Back a Supermarket

The supermarket located one block from my building closed in May 2005. At the time, this store closing was a minor inconvenience, since there was another supermarket two blocks away. My neighbors and I made many inquiries about the closed store and were always given assurances that the store would reopen. Meanwhile, other stores were closing in the area. In January 2008 the supermarket located two blocks away, Pioneer, was rumored to close. Its manager confirmed that the store would close because of a huge rent increase.

At that point, my neighbor Robin and I decided to alert the community. We created a simple flyer asking the neighbors if the closing of this store would impact the way in which they would access food. We added that if it would impact their choices they should contact their local elected officials, whose contact information was on the flyers. We then went to Assemblyman Powell's office, asking him to find out why the store located one block away and owned by NYCHA could not be reopened. We also contacted the Community Planning Board. Many residents called the elected officials. As a result, State Senator Serrano and Council Member Inez Dickens organized community meetings with the organizations involved in advocacy for healthy food choices. Because of the prominent voice of the community and advocates on this issue, NYCHA agreed to allow another supermarket owner to reopen the store.

The store reopened in November 2008. The manager and owner worked with the community to bring us quality produce and meats. We are very pleased that we were able to make this effort a positive experience. When we work together in unison, we understand how to solve problems that affect all of us.

Unfortunately, this is not the end to the story. The store that was reopened, Fine Fare, was given a letter that the new store will have to be closed to make way for new housing. There is no other place in this immediate area to relocate the store until the new housing is completed. We will again use the power of the community voice to keep this store from closing.

Respectfully submitted,
Emma J. Jackson

Recommendations from the participants of the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium Supermarkets Town Hall Meeting, September 24, 2008

Access to Healthy Food

- **INCREASED ACCESS** to healthy foods at fair prices – including prepared foods, vegetarian, organic, fresh and frozen foods, culturally appropriate foods, and basic products at affordable prices
- **QUALITY** fresh foods should be provided by clean food stores in **SUFFICIENT QUANTITY** to ensure access for the entire population of the community
- **LOCALLY GROWN** and sustainable foods should be sold in community-supported neighborhood markets
- **PLACEMENT** - Stores should allot a minimum square footage of stock for healthy foods and decrease the space taken up by processed foods. Healthy foods should be displayed prominently, and junk food should be placed far away from cash registers
- **LA MARQUETA** should be re-opened and a **WHOLESALE FARMERS' MARKET** should be created

... junk food should be placed far away from cash registers

Government Action to Promote Healthy and Affordable Food

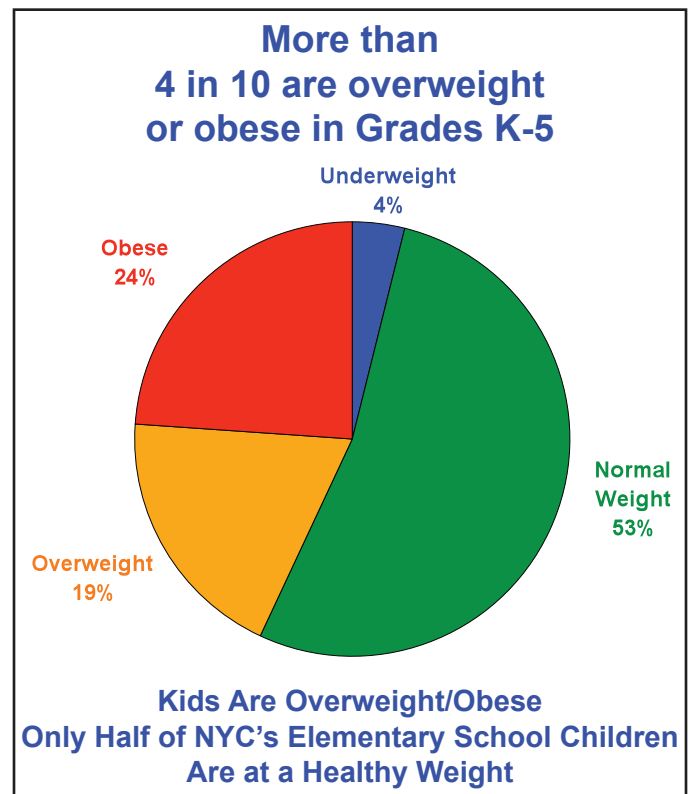
- **SUBSIDIES** and **INCENTIVES** should help establish new supermarkets and preserve existing ones on the condition that stores provide good jobs, healthy and affordable foods, universally accessible shelves, a clean environment and good service
- **LIMIT FAST FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS** – just as liquor stores are limited – by making them go through a review board
- **REQUIRE NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS** to incorporate planning for new supermarkets when applying for permits and zoning approvals
- **UTILIZE NYCHA HOUSING** to develop supermarkets and/or smaller stores selling healthy food
- **MANDATE ALL STORES** to accept, WIC and EBT
- **GOOD JOBS** with fair wages should be a requirement for stores to receive government subsidies. Employers must stop unfair labor practices

Empower Communities

- Work with stakeholder organizations like the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium to **ESTABLISH WAYS TO EMPOWER COMMUNITIES** and ensure ongoing input in shaping policy from communities most affected by the scarcity of healthy food and the high rates of chronic disease

Nutrition Education

- **PROVIDE WAYS TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION** about health issues and disease prevention, healthy options, nutrition labels, cooking unfamiliar items, and healthy cooking techniques. Utilize community centers, churches, schools, and in-store programs
- **CONDUCT WORKSHOPS IN SPANISH** and address cultural norms that contribute to the rise of preventable diseases in the Latino community. Cooking classes should be culturally appropriate



List D, Thorpe LE, Marx T, Hajat A, Platt R, Frieden TR. Obesity begins early. NYC Vital Signs 2003: 2(5); 1-2

In general, there are too many junk food options, too few healthy options, and too much fast food

Conversation in Harlem

Though various government agencies are seeking to address the growing loss of supermarkets in areas of high need, the Harlem Food and Fitness Consortium was concerned that there had not been an organized community voice weighing in on an issue that so clearly affects community residents. A Town Hall meeting was held as a way to gather input from community members. On September 24, 2008 some 130 people came together to learn more about the issue and to come up with recommendations. A panel of experts from the NYC Department of Health's local District Public Health Office, the Mayor's Office on Food Policy, Local 1500 of the United Food and Commercial Workers, the NYC Department of City Planning and WE ACT for Environmental Justice presented information and analysis on the issue from a variety of perspectives. Borough President Scott Stringer and Councilmember Melissa Mark-Viverito also addressed the group.

Following the presentations, small group discussions were held, in which participants spoke about how the scarcity of supermarkets is affecting community residents, the barriers residents are finding in accessing healthy food in general, and recommendations on how to increase the number of supermarkets and other ways to improve the food environment in Harlem. The recommendations on the previous page are based on those small group discussions.

There are an inadequate number of area supermarkets, making cooking at home more difficult



Lack of supermarkets contributes to high food prices and poor food quality

The following is a list of barriers that prevent residents from accessing healthy food in Harlem, identified during the forum.

Distance and access: There are an inadequate number of area supermarkets, making cooking at home more difficult. Residents have to travel a great distance for healthy, affordable foods because of the lack of access in their neighborhoods. This distance makes it inconvenient, difficult, and time-consuming to shop. Having to travel also means transportation costs add on to the cost of food. Area supermarkets are closing because of high rent and condominium developments. Also, special needs shoppers face unaddressed physical access barriers.

Food cost: Where healthy options are available, they are too costly.

Quality and selection: Many existing supermarkets, which are often unclean, do not carry high quality fresh food. This lack of supermarkets contributes to high food prices and poor food quality. They offer spoiled or rotting fruit and vegetables, meats and dairy items too close to expiration dates, and food that is unappealing. There is also a limited selection, particularly of healthy options and basic ethnic products used to prepare healthy meals. Managers at supermarkets are unresponsive to community needs and there is poor customer service.

Access to information: Community members lack access to knowledge about healthy foods, how to cook them, and where they can be purchased. Currently, there is not enough advertising about healthy foods, while junk food ads are targeted at children. In general, there are too many junk food options, too few healthy options, and too much fast food.

Jobs: The lack of supermarkets means a decreased number of well-paying local jobs.

40-50% of all African-American and Latino children born in 2000 will develop diabetes if current obesity rates continue¹



Harlem residents participate in the Supermarkets Town Hall Meeting. Approximately 130 community representatives attended the event on September 24, 2008.

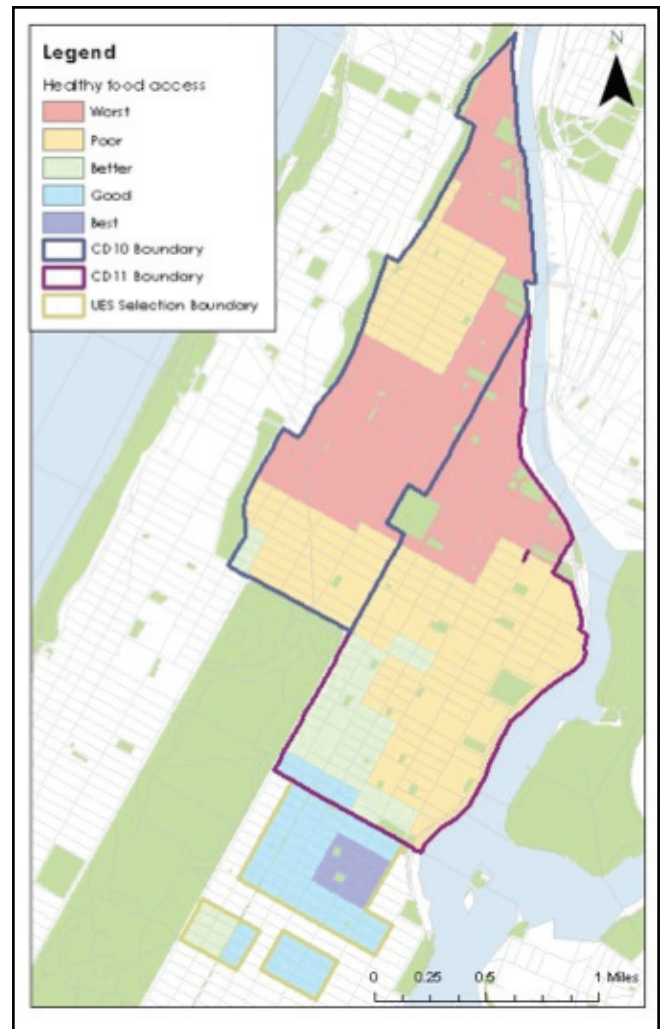
Policy climate: A call for food justice and community voices

As with many resources in our country, one of the fundamental reasons why the inequitable distribution of healthy and affordable food continues to exist today is because those who are negatively affected by this inequitable distribution – communities of color and low income – are generally not at the policy-making table. It is for this reason that bringing justice to the food system is about empowering our communities through education, advocacy, research, and public policy development for the equitable production, distribution, and consumption of healthy and affordable food.

Empowerment begins with a conversation. It is a conversation that extends outside of the halls of government and into senior centers, school auditoriums, tenant association meetings and churches. It is a conversation with communities of color and low income residents, whose supermarkets have closed, where too few bodegas and delis sell fruit and vegetables, whose schools often do not have the time or resources to provide nutrition education, whose soup kitchens and food pantry lines are increasing, whose food budgets are squeezed by rising prices and stagnant incomes, where some supermarket employers fail to provide fair wages and benefits, and who face all the other problems created by our broken food system. Yet, to ultimately succeed in achieving its goal of empowerment, the conversation must go beyond what we do not want in our communities and focus on what we do want. It must be about creating a unified vision for what we want our food system to be, what we want it to do, how we want that to be done, who will be a part of it, how they ought to be treated, and what their duties and rights will be. It must be about realizing our values and the changes we want to see in our community.

Some advocates, city agencies, elected officials, and universities understand this. They see that while educational campaigns influence some New Yorkers to eat less calories, while the fight for a supermarket to stay open brings food to people in the community it serves, and while food pantries can feed more people with more donations, these efforts are not enough. The inequitable distribution of healthy and affordable food is a systemic problem, influenced by classism and racism. This must be met with community based policy that addresses the issues of all the stakeholders to bring healthy and affordable food from farm to table. And that is why members of the Harlem Food and Fitness Consortium organized this Harlem Supermarkets Town Hall: we believe the community voice needs to be heard when developing policies. It is why the foundation of this document rests on community residents' concerns about supermarkets in Harlem and what can be done to keep them here and bring them back.

Central & East Harlem neighborhoods with almost no healthy food options



Central & East Harlem neighborhood map²

Fruit and vegetable intake increases with additional supermarkets³

Empowerment begins with a conversation ... outside of the halls of government and [in] senior centers, school auditoriums, tenant association meetings and churches

Background: Supermarkets and Health Disparities

Residents of East and Central Harlem (ECH) are currently facing a serious obesity epidemic. Sixty percent of adults and 46% of elementary school children are either overweight or obese⁴ and diabetes rates are over 70% higher than the Manhattan average. Moreover, a recent Centers for Disease Control study warned that about 40-50% of all African-American and Latino children born in 2000 will develop diabetes if current obesity rates continue.¹

Recent research^{3,5,6} has examined how the presence of supermarkets impacts residents' eating behaviors; studies have shown that there are fewer supermarkets in minority and low-income neighborhoods than in white or higher-income neighborhoods. In addition, higher supermarket density is related to a healthier diet⁷ and living near one or more supermarkets is associated with decreased obesity risk. In 2007, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene released a study entitled "Eating Well in Harlem: How Available is Healthy Food?"² This study, conducted by the Department's East & Central Harlem District Public Health Office, surveyed food establishments in East and Central Harlem as well as a sample on the Upper East Side (UES), a much more affluent neighborhood. Key findings included that supermarkets are far less common in ECH than the adjacent UES. In addition, bodegas carrying healthy foods are less likely to be located in ECH than on the UES. About 1 in 6 restaurants in ECH are fast-food establishments compared to only 1 in 25 of the restaurants surveyed on the UES. Furthermore, less than 1% of the UES sample live in areas where it is difficult to access healthy foods, compared to 44% of Central Harlem residents and 38% of East Harlem residents.

Extending this research, a recent Department of City Planning report⁸ concluded that community districts in ECH can be characterized as high need; that is, high diabetes and obesity rates, low consumption of fruit and vegetables, a lack of available fresh food sources, and a low potential for new food retailers to open. At present, these neighborhoods fall short of the recommended number of supermarkets per number of residents. Taken together, these findings point to a need for coalition-building and advocacy to maintain and expand access to healthy food for the residents of East and Central Harlem.

Status of current supermarkets in Harlem. In the summer of 2008 the Consortium conducted a survey of current supermarkets to determine how many others may be at risk of closing. Operators and, where possible, owners of food stores of at least 4,000 square feet in size were contacted. A total of 32 supermarkets were identified in East and Central Harlem. Fourteen were relatively small, between 4,000 and 10,000 sq. ft. Eighteen were over 10,000 sq. ft. – these are the stores with capacity for more fresh produce. Of these 18 larger stores, 1 has a lease due to last for more than 10 years, 4 have leases

The Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium

Many organizations in the community are working hard to address the problems of obesity and related diseases in Harlem. There are excellent programs geared to getting kids physically active, engaging adults in regular exercise, and teaching healthy eating and cooking. But the organizations realize that these efforts alone are not enough to bring the epidemic under control. It is why over 60 organizations have come together to confront this public health threat.

The Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium is an alliance of existing coalitions, community-based and citywide organizations, government agencies, faith-based organizations, community boards, and health care institutions. Our mission is to foster healthy lifestyles and healthy environments in Harlem and Upper Manhattan.

The primary activities of the Consortium are to serve as an information clearinghouse for physical activity and nutrition resources, advocate for the enforcement of healthy policies, facilitate connections and collaboration among consortium members and the community, identify gaps in services and resources, and initiate broad-based community-wide campaigns. The current focus of the Consortium is to harness its efforts to promote the preservation of existing supermarkets and the development of new ones. The Department of Health & Mental Hygiene's District Public Health Office serves as coordinator of the Consortium.

There are approximately 10 sites the Consortium has identified that previously used to be supermarkets but are now empty

for between 5 and 10 years longer, 5 have leases that expire in less than 5 years, 5 were not sure how much time remains in their lease period, and 3 own their own building.

Potential space availability for new supermarkets in Harlem. A major issue for increasing the number of supermarkets in Harlem will involve locating space suitable for establishing stores large enough to store fresh fruit and vegetables. The New York City Housing Authority has over 30 developments in Harlem but currently only 7 of them have commercial space, and of these, 5 are already used for supermarkets. However, NYCHA does have properties currently not used for housing, such as parking lots, that could be utilized creatively for developing supermarkets. Currently, aside from NYCHA developments, there are approximately 10 sites the Consortium has identified that previously used to be supermarkets but are now empty.

The response of government agencies

Supermarket closures and related food access issues have been addressed on the state and city levels by the formation of a NYS Food Policy Council, a NYC Supermarket Commission and a NYC Office of Food Policy and Internal Working group on Supermarkets. These bodies, which include the representation of numerous stakeholders in the food production and distribution system, are charged with making recommendations to the state and city government regarding policies that would improve food access in our communities.

The **New York State Food Policy Council** makes recommendations to the governor regarding policies that will ensure the availability of safe, fresh, nutritious, and affordable food for New Yorkers. It is composed of twenty-one members appointed by the Governor, representing all aspects of the food system.⁹ While focusing on increasing access to healthy food options for low-income residents, seniors, and children, the council also works to promote New York agricultural products to New York consumers.¹⁰ The council conducted listening sessions throughout New York State: in Albany, Syracuse, Lower Manhattan, Harlem, Binghamton, and Rochester. A second listening session was convened in Harlem, upon request by advocates, to ensure that community members were able to give testimony, in a neighborhood that had been severely affected by supermarket closures. The council's Recommendations to Governor Patterson were submitted on December 1, 2008.¹¹

National ratios for supermarket size-to-people do not work for NYC. They are formulated for suburban shopping centers

The **New York Supermarket Commission** was formed to address health disparities caused by inadequate access to healthy foods by creating policy recommendations to spur supermarket development in underserved communities. It is a private-public partnership composed of city and state agencies, supermarket owners, and labor, public health and children's advocates. The Food Trust¹² a non-profit organization that has worked to address the problem of inadequate food access in Pennsylvania, convenes the commission with the NYC Food Policy Coordinator, the Food Industry Alliance and the Food Bank for New York City. The Commission will release its recommendations to the City Council, the Mayor's Office, the Governor and both houses of the State Legislature in early 2009.

The position of **Food Policy Coordinator** was established in November 2006 by Mayor Bloomberg, tasked with expanding the availability of nutritious, affordable food in underserved communities, enhancing the nutritional standards followed by city agencies in feeding clients and staff, and improving access to food support programs. The Food Policy Coordinator oversees a Food Policy Task Force composed of internal working groups of City Agencies that consider nutritional standards, food access and affordability. The **working group on Supermarkets** looks at issues of access to healthy, affordable food in relation to supermarkets. The report, entitled "Going to Market"⁸, released by the Department of City Planning in June 2008 and presented at the Harlem Supermarkets Town Hall was a project of this working group. Members of this working group also participate in the New York Supermarket Commission to share their insights and better coordinate their efforts with the food industry, labor and advocacy groups, state government, and economic development organizations.

What is the optimal ratio of neighborhood supermarkets to New Yorkers?

- National ratios for supermarket size-to-people do not work for NYC. They are formulated for suburban shopping centers.
National ratio for supermarkets to people: 50,000 to 100,000 sq. ft. per 10K people in an 8 to 10 minute drive time
- NYC's neighborhoods are dense, pedestrian - oriented, urban environments. The City is a built environment and stores no larger than 30,000 sq. ft. can be developed on most local commercial corridors.

Existing average citywide ratio for local supermarkets to people: 15,000 sq. ft. per 10K people in neighborhood

City Planning standard ratio for NYC local supermarkets to people: 30,000 sq. ft. per 10K people in neighborhood

- Goal: Increase the current Citywide Average Ratio from 15,000 sq. ft. per 10K people to the City Planning standard ratio of 30,000 sq. ft. per 10K people.

Only 2 Community Districts (CDs) citywide currently meet the City Planning standard ratio: CDs 4 and 5 in Manhattan

Neighborhood supermarket ratio⁸

Next steps

As evident from the information presented above, the struggle to bring justice to the food system will not be easy for advocates, government officials, business, labor, and community residents. Every day we face the local realities of global challenges, from the collapse of our financial system to economic pressures that displace supermarkets. Despite these challenges, the Harlem Food and Fitness Consortium believes that the Harlem Supermarkets Town Hall meeting has helped to put us on the right track to organize our communities and to develop a vision for a food system that provides healthy and affordable food through supermarkets in Harlem.

We have transmitted the recommendations from this report to relevant city and state policy makers and to the commissions that have been convened to address food policy. We will continue to advocate for community input as new policies and programs are proposed to address the shortage of supermarkets. We hope you will join us in the fight for Food Justice.

For more information about the Consortium, and about the supermarkets effort in particular, please contact James Subudhi (WE ACT) at 212-961-1000 ext. 320, Lina Cherfas (BBKH) at 212-289-2400, or Mike Hernández (Healthy Monday) at 917-841-6617.

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 - ⁴ Matte T, Gordon C, Goodman A, Selenic D, Young C, Deitcher D. *Obesity in East and Central Harlem: A look across generations*. New York, NY: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2007.
 - ⁵ Morland K, Filomena S. Disparities in the availability of fruits and vegetables between racially segregated urban neighborhoods. *Public Health Nutr*. 2007;10(12):1481-9.
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 - ⁷ Lopez RP. Neighborhood risk factors for obesity. *Obesity*. 2007;15:2111-2119.
 - ⁸ <http://nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/supermarket/index.shtml> (Accessed October 20, 2008).
 - ⁹ <http://www.nyscfp.org/#2>
 - ¹⁰ <http://ny.gov/governor/press/0520071.html>
 - ¹¹ For more information on the NYS Food Policy Council, visit: <http://www.nyscfp.org>
 - ¹² For more information on the Food Trust, visit: <http://www.thefoodtrust.org>

