

Farmers market vouchers may boost produce consumption in low-income families

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Vouchers to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets increase the amount of produce in the diets of some families on food assistance, according to research led by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The study, which appears online in *Food Policy*, suggests that farmers market vouchers can be useful tools in improving access to healthy food. This finding validates a new program created by the Agricultural Act of 2014, or farm bill, that incentivizes low-income families to buy produce at farmers markets.

"In terms of healthy food options, farmers market incentives may be able to bring a low-income person onto the same playing field as those with greater means," said Carolyn Dimitri, an associate professor of food studies at NYU Steinhardt and the study's lead author.

Economically disadvantaged families tend to consume diets low in fruits and vegetables, partially due to poor access to healthy food and their inability to pay for it. Farmers markets may help fill in gaps in communities commonly referred to as "food deserts," which lack access to fresh, healthy food.

One in four farmers markets in the U.S. accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps. In recent years, several local governments and nonprofit organizations have augmented federal food assistance by offering vouchers to use at farmers markets. The vouchers increase the value of food assistance when used to buy fruits and vegetables at markets.

While most food assistance programs fail to

address nutritional quality – for instance, SNAP benefits can be used to buy ice cream and soda – farmers market incentives can only be used on fresh produce, increasing their potential to improve consumers' diets.

To assess the effect of farmers market incentives on those receiving food assistance, Dimitri and her colleagues enrolled 281 economically disadvantaged women in their study, recruiting participants at five farmers markets in New York, San Diego and Boston. The women were all caring for young children and received federal food assistance through SNAP or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The researchers collected demographic information and surveyed the participants throughout the 12-16 week study to learn about their food shopping habits and fresh vegetable consumption. Each time participants shopped at the farmers market, they received up to \$10 in vouchers to be used toward purchasing fruits and vegetables. The women matched the amount of the farmers market vouchers with cash or federal food benefits.

Despite incentives, retaining participants was a challenge, suggesting that factors other than incentives influence farmers market shopping habits. A total of 138 participants completed the study, which is consistent with retention rates for similar studies. Women who were older, visited food banks and lived in "food deserts" were the most likely to drop out of the study.

For those who completed the study, more than half reported consuming vegetables more frequently at the end of the study. Participants with low levels of education and those who consumed little fresh produce at the beginning of the study were the most likely to increase the amount of produce in

their diets.

"Our food choices are very complex, and issues with food security won't be solved with a single program," Dimitri said. "Even though not all participants increased their consumption of produce, our study suggests that nutrition incentives are a promising option that can help economically disadvantaged families eat healthier diets."

Additional research is needed to understand why produce consumption did not increase among nearly half of the participants, despite their increased purchasing power, and determine what measures can be taken to engage the vulnerable group that dropped out of the study.

While [farmers markets](#) are good sources of healthy food, the researchers noted that relying on them exclusively for [food](#) security is problematic, as markets are usually open on limited days and closed in the winter.

Provided by New York University

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