



SNAP Farmers Market Focus Groups & Interviews

Summary of Findings

Project Summary

In early 2016, as part of the SNAP Harvest Bucks project, Boulder County Public Health conducted focus groups and key-informant interviews with Boulder County residents receiving SNAP benefits. The discussions provided valuable information about the knowledge, barriers, and resources needed to encourage SNAP recipients to shop at a farmers market for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Project Goals

The interviews and focus groups aimed to help staff better understand how best to encourage SNAP recipients to purchase fruits and vegetables at a farmers market by understanding their experiences, knowledge, self-efficacy, and motivations related to:

1. Shopping for fresh produce
2. Cooking fresh vegetables
3. Visiting/shopping at a farmers market
4. The Harvest Bucks program
5. Services and support for SNAP participants at farmers markets
6. Outreach materials and methods

Participants

Three 90-minute focus groups were conducted in English, one in each of the major population areas in Boulder County: Longmont (5 participants), Boulder (3 participants), and Lafayette (8 participants). In addition, three key-informant interviews were conducted (1 in English; two in Spanish). Each participant was given \$50 in Boulder County Farmers Market “Market Bucks” at the conclusion of the group or interview.

Limitations

Boulder County Farmers Market “Market Bucks” were used as an incentive for recruiting so participants may have chosen to participate in the focus groups based on their interest in and preference for farmers markets. Feedback from Spanish-speaking residents was limited.

Themes

Overall, experiences, feeling, and motivations shared by the participants were consistent across the groups and interviews with just a few exceptions. A summary of the key themes is outlined in this report.

A. Price is a top consideration when purchasing fresh produce

While all participants consider other factors besides price when choosing where they purchase their fresh fruits and vegetables, price was most often the primary consideration. Many participants describe making their purchasing decisions based on weekly sales and/or what they need to complement food they receive from food pantries. Additional considerations include convenience (e.g. access via public transportation or bike; location to home or work), quality of produce, reputation of the store (e.g. Whole foods vs. Walmart), and access to organic or local produce.

B. Most are comfortable cooking fresh vegetables; interested in cooking demonstrations

Most participants expressed comfort with cooking fresh vegetables but were also open to learning more. While participants mentioned that they might take a recipe if it was available at a farmers market stand, they repeatedly mentioned that they just “Google” recipes and find what they need.

“I know the basics...but off the top of my head, I feel like I could learn more.”

“I need some inspiration.”

“I don’t feel like I can mess it up.”

Participants were interested in cooking demonstrations with the caveat that they would need to be short (e.g. 10 minutes); kid-friendly; and consider health issues/allergies. Most agreed that they likely wouldn’t attend a planned cooking demonstration, but would stop by if they saw one at a farmers market.

C. Most would like help stretching the SNAP budget with healthy foods

Important to increasing knowledge and pleasure in cooking with fresh produce was having good quality cooking equipment (e.g. a good quality knife, pan, pressure cooker, etc.); recipes their children can help cook; and the opportunity to learn ways to stretch their SNAP budget with healthy foods (e.g. how to make produce last longer by canning, freezing etc.).

“When you shop, food goes bad in four days...If you get food stamps you shop as much as you can on the first day ‘cause you’re starving, and then the stuff is going bad...”

“You buy as much as you can because it’s on sale, then all of it has gone bad.”

“If you want to feed your kids healthy, you have to spend the extra, and fruit and veggies do go bad fast.”

Other ideas include a cooking class/shared commercial kitchen for SNAP participants where they could make and share healthy food together, as well as a shared garden.

“That’s the class I would go to. How to make your market bucks stretch through the winter.”

“[A shared garden], that’s what I crave.”

“I can take my child [to shared garden] and show her ‘look, you can grow your own things’.”

D. Entertainment, quality of produce, and supporting 'local' is motivation to visit farmers market

Participants consistently described farmers' markets as an event and an experience, particularly when they have a limited budget for entertainment. It is seen as an opportunity to be part of a community that often they don't get to be a part of with a limited budget. Participants also described it as a way to learn and try new things.

"Like a festival for food."

"An event to take your friends to."

"It's a place of community. It's a fun place to go, even on dates."

In addition, most participants described supporting local business and the community as very important, and a reason to shop at a farmers market.

"I want to support the local farmers."

"It's [purchasing at farmers markets] a personal interaction. You kinda get to know where the food's coming from."

"I'd rather help a little business than a giant business."

"You can actually talk to the people who grew your food."

All participants viewed produce from farmers markets as fresh, local, and high quality and a preference for shopping there (in the absence of the barriers of cost and crowds).

"I feel better eating the fruit and produce there. A lot of it is organic."

"You know your food is fresh. There really is a difference in the taste of the food."

"It's nice to know they're fresh...you're not picking up an apple from, like, Walmart, and thinking 'what kind of pesticide was sprayed on you? What am I putting in my child's body?' versus going to the farmers market, you know its fresh..."

"They're not waxed, they're not artificially colored."

E. Crowds and cost are barriers to visiting farmers markets, especially with children

Across all focus groups, the two primary barriers to shopping at a farmers market are cost and crowds. This was particularly true for participants who have small children.

"Take a Xanax before you go to the Boulder farmers market."

"It's extremely overwhelming...extremely overwhelming."

"I don't get the shopping done that I want to get done." (especially with children in-tow)

"Having children, it's hard to sit, and look, and peruse and find the cheapest deals."

"Sometimes it's more expensive, if you're not careful"

"Apples shouldn't cost like gold."

"I think it's overpriced, but you're also paying for the experience."

"I prefer to go to farmers market because I want to support it, but it's like three times as much, even with the Market Bucks (means Harvest Bucks)."

"I enjoy the experience, even though it does cost more."

“Sometimes the farmers market isn’t the best place for larger quantities. Like, if I need three heads of broccoli it’s going to be crazy expensive.”

Other barriers to visiting include inadequate/paid parking, lack of adequate public transportation (Longmont), limited hours, lack of shelter from heat or rain, greater ease of shopping for all food and household items at one time (e.g. at Target).

Note: The Farmers Market in Boulder was specifically referenced related to being crowded and overwhelming. The Longmont market was described as more open, calm, and friendly. Both the Longmont and Louisville markets were described as being ‘family-oriented’.

F. Spanish-speaking residents were unfamiliar and uncomfortable visiting a farmers market.

While only 3 Spanish-speaking or bilingual residents participated in interviews, 2 of the three were not familiar with the concept of a farmers market and were unfamiliar with the Boulder County Farmers Markets. One participant who was familiar with farmers markets stated she was uncomfortable shopping there without her husband because she does not speak Spanish (her husband is bilingual).

G. Double SNAP benefit is a motivation to shop at farmers markets

About half of participants had already heard about and used the double SNAP farmers market program and found it to be easy to use and extremely beneficial. Those who did not know about it or had not used it stated that it would motivate them to shop at a farmers market.

“Really appreciate that I can match non-food items and use doubling to get veggies.”

“[Doubling is] very beneficial. Extremely beneficial.”

“I’d be much more inclined to go to one [farm stand] that offers the match dollars than one that doesn’t.”

“If we could get that 2 for 1, we would be able to afford to go to the farmers market. It makes it possible.”

“Exciting, if it’s easy to find, easy to convert, smooth transaction. That’s motivating. I’d be willing to try it immediately.”

“I experienced it and that’s part of why I really utilize the farmers market.”

“Totally [would motivate me].”

“It’s an option for people to feel like they can integrate with the community, even though they aren’t as fancy or they don’t have those other luxuries.”

“[Makes me feel like] I fit in Boulder even though I might be unemployed or in a transition phase.”

“[Makes you feel like] you have choices like everybody else...”

“It’s a perk.” “You don’t feel like you’re being segregated.”

“No matter how strong in your mind you want to be healthy, when it comes to money, you do have to make choices that aren’t so healthy. This really, really helps with that.”

H. Most don’t want to be identified as SNAP beneficiaries

Most participants described a stigma related to receiving SNAP benefits and didn’t want to be singled out as “different,” including using different “bucks” than non-SNAP recipients, or having to visit a tent specifically for SNAP recipients to receive the double-bucks benefit. Some comments related to having a SNAP-specific tent include:

“You’re too poor, this is where you go to be shamed.”

"It's embarrassing...like wearing a shirt that says 'hello, I'm on welfare'."

"[That's a] horrible idea. It's so nice now that [SNAP benefits] is a card – that seems to be going backwards."

"It's not always pleasant to have a public conversation [about public benefits], depending on who's there."

In addition, participants expressed feeling judgement and a sense of not deserving more expensive healthy and organic foods while receiving benefits.

"For a while I felt like...I don't deserve this because I'm on food stamps."

"I don't think we should be made to feel bad [to buy healthy/organic]."

"You almost feel like you don't get enough of a chance to make that [healthy] choice when you're on food stamps."

"It's sad because it seems like it [eating healthy] is almost an unattainable goal for you when you're on food stamps; you're bargaining a lot, which is unfortunate."

I. Farmers markets should be spacious and provide a sense of community

Most participants described their ideal market as a place that has plenty of space, feels 'grassroots,' and provides a sense of community.

"I don't really like it to be programmed...opening up like a shopping mall."

"More grassroots based."

"Not like a carnival."

Specific suggestions for the design of future farmers markets include:

- Kid-friendly
- Spacious
- Music (not too loud)
- Activities and space for kids (not next to music)
- Seating areas
- Shade and misters
- Easy and free parking, accessible by bike, foot, public transportation
- An additional evening or Sunday market
- Classes and demonstrations for freezing, canning, preserving, backyard bees, porch gardening, cheese-making, including explanation of health benefits
- Goats and chickens
- Farmers market ambassador that provides tours and samples to all visitors (not specific to SNAP)
- Chair massage
- A community garden (as part of the farmers market)
- A community tent with community resources such as information about car-share, community events, bus schedules, etc.

J. Your Guide to the Farmers Market brochure is helpful

Most participants found the current “Your Guide to the Farmers Market” brochure to be the most helpful of all three materials reviewed. Specifically, participants noted that they liked:

- The seasonal calendar
- “Tips for the Market” section
- WIC information
- SNAP-Ed information
- Contact information
- Phrase: “Locally grown produce supports locally grown families.”
- Phrase about farmers market foods lasting longer

Suggestions for improvement include:

- Simplify/reduce text
- Separate Spanish and English into two brochures
- Add language such as “SNAP-eligible,” or “double” on the front
- Include minimums and maximum EBT requirements
- Describe clearly how to get Harvest Bucks and what they’re used for
- Describe clearly where to go at the market where someone can explain how it works
- Include images of each type of buck and how it can be used
- Include the closest bus stop
- Include map of market

K. Multiple types of “bucks” is confusing

Participants who had not used Harvest Bucks expressed confusion about the many different types and names of bucks. However, those who had used the program were able to explain what each buck could be used for, as well as how the program works. Participants suggested adding images of each type of buck to the brochure, along with an explanation of what it can be used for.

L. Best way to reach SNAP recipients is through “official” mail

Most participants suggested “official-looking” mail from the county (e.g. recertification letter) as the best way to notify them of official information (not advertising) related to the Harvest Bucks program. Another suggestion was to list information on grocery receipts next to the SNAP balance, since this is checked often. Most important is that the message looks official and important.

Other suggestions for outreach include through schools in children’s Friday folders; doctor’s offices; case workers; and other partner organizations serving people with low income, such as the Our Center and food kitchen/pantries.

Advertising suggestions included near “free classes” in the newspaper or on Craig’s list, the Colorado Daily, and Colorado Parent magazine. Using terms like “for reduced income,” or “SNAP-eligible” were also highlighted as important to use in outreach materials.

Participants mentioned that they found it difficult to find all of the resources available to them in Boulder County and would love a website with all of the resources in one location. Some would be interested in signing up to receive updates by text, email, or mail.

Additional Feedback

- In every group, Miller Farms was mentioned for their \$10 bags of produce and their support and openness towards SNAP recipients.
- Favorite fruits and vegetables was often related to pleasant and often childhood memories as well as easy access, such as avocados growing in the backyard as a child in California, or picking peaches off the family trees in southern Colorado.
- Those with children express the need for meals to be easy and quick to make.
- There is significant interest in having access to/participating in community gardens.
- Most were very comfortable talking to a farmer about how to cook a vegetable they were selling.
- Some expressed disappointment that doubling was not available at the Louisville market.
- Sometimes, although not often, participants felt an “oh, you have EBT vibe” from some farmers.

