

Eating Well in Harlem: How Available Is Healthy Food?



A Report from the East and Central Harlem District Public Health Office



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT
of HEALTH and MENTAL HYGIENE
Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor
Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner

Key Findings

1. Bodegas are more abundant and supermarkets less common in East and Central Harlem compared with the Upper East Side.

- Approximately 2 in 3 food stores in East and Central Harlem are bodegas, compared with 1 in 3 food stores polled on the the Upper East Side.
- While offering convenient hours and locations, bodegas have a more limited product selection than supermarkets and other stores do.
- Supermarkets, which offer more choices and a greater selection of healthy foods, are more common on the Upper East Side than in East and Central Harlem. There are 3 supermarkets per 10,000 people on the Upper East Side compared to 2 supermarkets per 10,000 people in East and Central Harlem.

2. Bodegas carrying healthy foods are less likely to be located in East and Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.

- Low-fat milk is carried in nearly 6 of 10 bodegas on the Upper East Side, compared with only about 3 of 10 bodegas in East and Central Harlem. Low-fat yogurt and cottage cheese are also more readily available in Upper East Side bodegas (39%) than in East and Central Harlem stores (20%).
- Leafy green vegetables are available in 3% of East and Central Harlem bodegas, while 20% of Upper East Side bodegas offer leafy greens.

3. Restaurants are common in all 3 neighborhoods, but fast-food establishments are more prevalent in East and Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.

- Of the 336 restaurants in East and Central Harlem, 53 (16%) are fast-food establishments. Only 8 (4%) of the 184 restaurants polled on the Upper East Side are fast-food establishments.

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Editorial

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Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

Deborah Deitcher, Director of Communications

This Report

Obesity is a major health problem in New York City—more than half of adult New Yorkers are either overweight or obese. Being at an unhealthy weight increases a person’s risk of developing many conditions, including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cancer, and heart disease.

Poor neighborhoods have higher rates of obesity and more deaths due to diabetes and heart disease than more affluent neighborhoods. About 31% of adults in East Harlem and 27% in Central Harlem are obese; in contrast, the citywide obesity rate is 22%, and on the Upper East Side (a wealthier neighborhood next to East Harlem), 9% of adults are obese. About 13% of adults in East Harlem and 12% in Central Harlem have diabetes, compared with 9% of adults citywide and 3%* on the Upper East Side.¹

Healthy eating habits and increased physical activity are the most important ways to fight the obesity epidemic. Yet we know that neighborhood conditions and resources, particularly access to healthy food options, can have a profound impact on residents’ everyday lives. Research suggests that access to food—including the availability, quality, and price of healthy foods, and the presence of supermarkets and advertising—affect the food choices of residents,^{2,8} many of whom shop close to home.

This report examines the retail food environment in Central and East Harlem. The Upper East Side was used as a comparison neighborhood—although it is geographically contiguous to East Harlem and has a similar residential and commercial mix, the area has much lower rates of illness. **Table 1** shows a comparison of several neighborhood characteristics.

Table 1. Select demographic indicators for neighborhood comparison

Neighborhood Demographics	Central Harlem Population: 107,109	East Harlem Population: 117,743	Upper East Side** Population: 217,063
Black/African-American Non-Hispanic	82,750 (77.3%)	42,062 (35.7%)	6,907 (3.2%)
Hispanic	18,019 (16.8%)	61,343 (52.1%)	13,026 (6.0%)
White and other races/ Non-Hispanic	6,340 (5.9%)	14,338 (12.2%)	197,130 (90.8%)
Household income below poverty level	37%	37%	7%
Living in public housing	19%	30%	1%

** These Upper East Side data are for the entire neighborhood, not just the sample area surveyed in this study.

Methods

Researchers working with the East and Central Harlem District Public Health Office conducted a block-by-block assessment of every establishment selling food and beverages in East and Central Harlem. At each store surveyed, researchers obtained permission to conduct the assessment. A sample of Upper East Side establishments, selected to reflect a land use distribution similar to that of East Harlem, was also surveyed. The survey was conducted in the summer and fall of 2005.

We grouped food stores into the following categories:[‡]

- Small grocery stores, commonly known as bodegas
- Supermarkets (chains and independently-owned)
- Specialty stores (for example, bakeries, meat markets)
- Gas station convenience stores
- Drug stores (chains and independently-owned)

In each establishment assessed, we determined the availability, placement, and price of representative healthy and unhealthy foods, as well as the presence and type of storefront advertisements (food, non-alcoholic beverage, alcohol, or cigarette ads).

* Estimate is unstable due to small sample size and should be interpreted with caution.

‡ Certain categories of food stores, only present on the Upper East Side (e.g., full-scale delis with salad bars), were not assessed in this survey and were excluded from our tally.

1. Bodegas are more abundant and supermarkets less common in East and Central Harlem compared with the Upper East Side.

In Central Harlem, East Harlem and the Upper East Side, food is sold in a variety of stores, including bodegas; supermarkets; specialty stores (meat and fish markets, mobile vendors and bakeries); gas stations and other convenience stores; and drug stores (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Store type by neighborhood

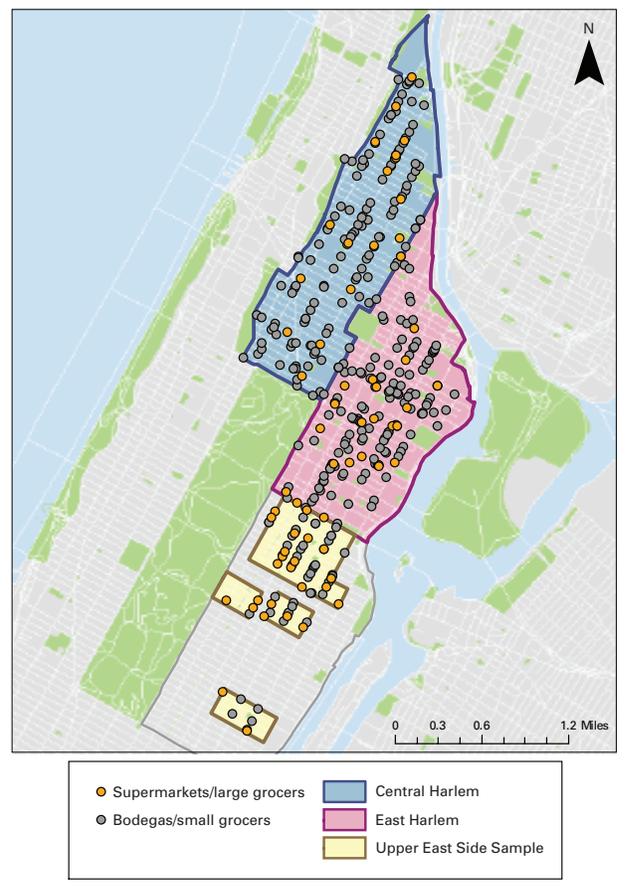
Neighborhood	Bodegas	Supermarkets	Specialty	Drug stores	Convenience stores	Total
Central Harlem	153 (65.4%)	19 (8.1%)	32 (13.7%)	14 (6.0%)	16 (6.8%)	234
East Harlem	174 (66.2%)	21 (8.0%)	34 (12.9%)	15 (5.7%)	19 (7.2%)	263
Upper East Side*	46 (33.1%)	26 (18.7%)	48 (34.5%)	18 (12.9%)	1 (0.7%)	139
Totals	373 (58.6%)	66 (10.4%)	114 (17.9%)	47 (7.4%)	36 (5.7%)	636

* Unlike East and Central Harlem, where the survey included all food stores located in these neighborhoods, the survey conducted on the Upper East Side included a sample of food stores.

Small groceries (bodegas) are the most common food stores in East and Central Harlem, and are an important source of everyday food purchases for community residents.⁸ About 2 out of 3 food stores are bodegas in these 2 neighborhoods, compared with 1 out of 3 stores in the Upper East Side sample (**Figure 1**). Bodegas offer convenient locations and hours, but have a more limited product selection than most other types of stores.

Supermarkets offer the widest variety of foods and healthy choices—but are less common than bodegas and are dispersed unequally through the neighborhoods. In East and Central Harlem, there are 2 supermarkets per 10,000 people compared to 3 supermarkets per 10,000 on the Upper East Side, which allows Upper East Side residents more opportunity to purchase healthy food. This finding supports other research indicating that supermarket density is associated with higher-income areas and areas with a lower proportion of black residents.^{5,9}

Figure 1. Bodegas far outnumber supermarkets in East and Central Harlem.

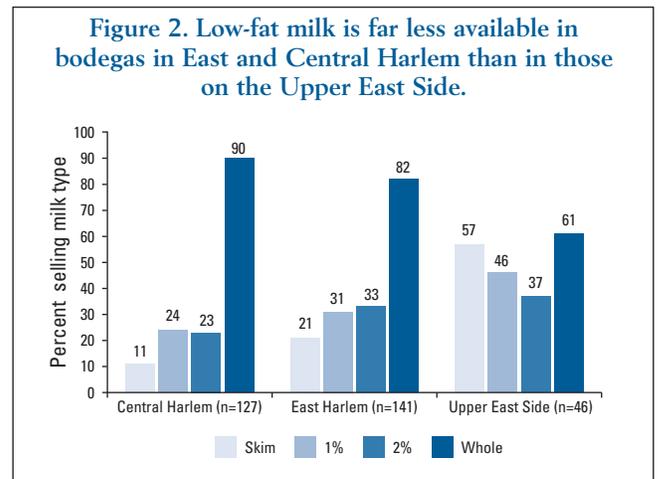


2. Bodegas carrying healthy foods are less likely to be located in East or Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.

Access to affordable, nutritious foods (those that are low in fat and sodium, and rich in vitamins and fiber) makes it easier to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. We examined the availability of low-fat dairy products, fruit, and leafy green vegetables in each of the 3 neighborhoods.

Milk

Reduced-fat milk (2%, 1%, or skim/fat-free) provides all the nutritional benefits of whole milk, with less fat and fewer calories. About 1 in 3 bodegas in East and Central Harlem sells low-fat milk (skim or 1%), while whole milk is commonly found in 90% of Central Harlem bodegas and 82% of East Harlem bodegas. In contrast, in small groceries on the Upper East Side, skim milk is found nearly as frequently (57%) as whole milk (61%) (**Figure 2**).



Low-fat yogurt and cottage cheese

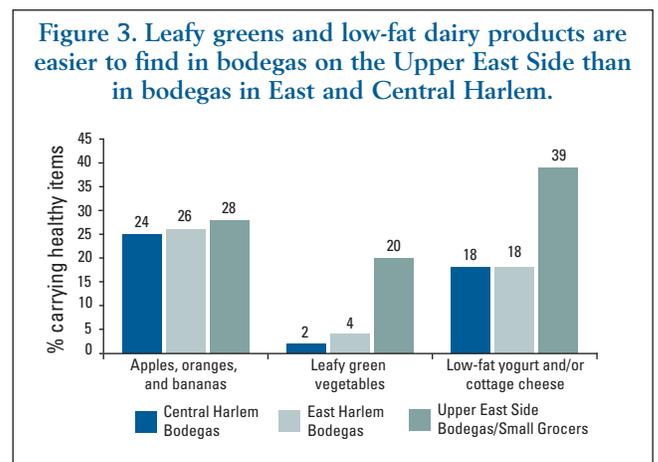
Low-fat yogurt and cottage cheese, like milk, are excellent sources of calcium and vitamin D. But finding low-fat yogurt and cottage cheese in neighborhood bodegas can be a challenge. In East and Central Harlem, less than 1 in 5 (18%) bodegas sells one or both of these low-fat dairy products, compared with 39% on the Upper East Side (**Figure 3**).

Fruit

Fruit is high in vitamins and fiber, and is an important part of a healthy diet. Overall, about 1 in 3 stores in all 3 neighborhoods carry some fresh fruit. While 3 common fruits—apples, oranges, and bananas—are found in most supermarkets in the neighborhoods, only about 1 in 4 bodegas carries them all (**Figure 3**).

Leafy green vegetables

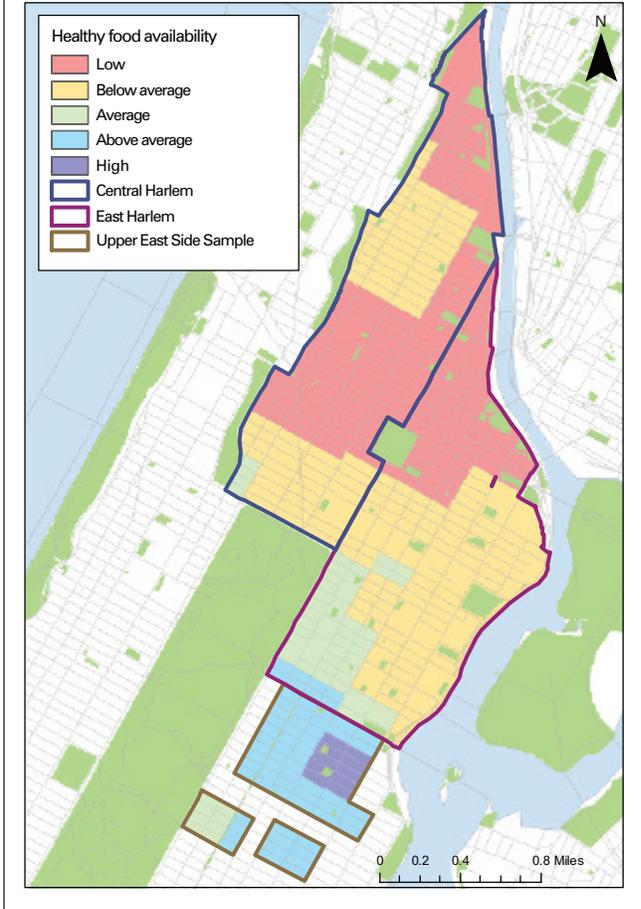
Leafy green vegetables, such as spinach, kale, and collard greens, are excellent sources of vitamins, calcium, and fiber. They are also low in calories, have no cholesterol, and are fat-free. While 20% of Upper East Side bodegas carry leafy greens, they are scarce in East Harlem (4%) and Central Harlem (2%) bodegas (**Figure 3**).



Overall availability of healthy food

East and Central Harlem have relatively few supermarkets, and most of the bodegas in these neighborhoods carry neither low-fat milk nor leafy greens. Fast-food establishments are abundant. Taken together, these data indicate that, in East and Central Harlem, healthy food options are limited (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4. Healthy food availability by neighborhood

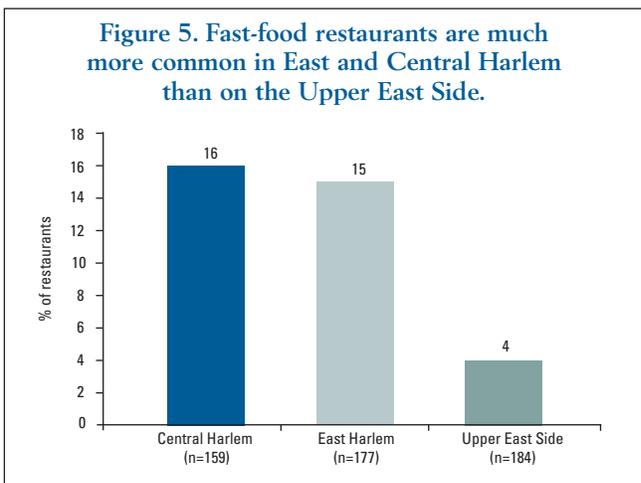


3. Restaurants are common in all 3 neighborhoods, but fast-food establishments are more prevalent in East and Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.

Since about one-third of the calories we consume are from food prepared outside the home,¹⁰ strategies for achieving a healthy weight must take restaurants into account.

There are 520 restaurants in the 3 neighborhoods (159 in Central Harlem, 177 in East Harlem, and 184 in the Upper East Side sample). Fast-food restaurants (defined as national or local chains with no wait-staff service) are more prevalent in East and Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side—there are 24 fast-food establishments per 100,000 residents in East and Central Harlem compared with 8 fast-food restaurants per 100,000 residents on the Upper East Side (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Fast-food restaurants are much more common in East and Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.



Recommendations

Fostering a healthy food environment in East and Central Harlem requires collaboration among local businesses, community organizations, and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Recommended strategies include:

- **Providing healthier offerings at local food establishments, especially in neighborhoods with few healthy food options.**

In bodegas:

- Identify and address barriers to carrying healthy foods (for example, working with food distribution networks).
- Stock healthy foods such as reduced-fat milk, fresh fruits and vegetables, and whole grain foods.
- Advertise for health by promoting healthy foods in storefront ads, at the cash register, and on shelves and cooler doors.
- Encourage customers to try new healthy foods through reduced-price campaigns.

In restaurants:

- Use healthier cooking methods and products (for example, eliminate use of trans fat-containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils).
- Provide healthier menu options—promote them on the menu and offer discounts for healthier options.
- Provide educational materials about healthier options offered.

In supermarkets:

- Promote healthy choices through advertising and price incentives, and disseminate materials on healthy eating, including recipes.

- **Promoting consumer demand for nutritious food at affordable prices through education and social marketing.**

- **Encouraging new venues for purchasing healthy foods.**

- Establish neighborhood farmers' markets, cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture programs.

References

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New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

May 2007

Resources

Obesity—what everyone should know: www.nyc.gov/health/obesity

Keeping your child healthy and ready to learn: www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/scah/scah-healthy.shtml

A guide to fitness and nutrition programs in East and Central Harlem:
www.nyc.gov.html/doh/downloads/pdf/cdp/cdp-resource-harlem.pdf

Dietary guidelines for Americans 2005: www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/dga2005.pdf

Finding your way to a healthier you: www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/brochure.pdf

Fruits and vegetables—eat 5 to 9 a day: www.5aday.gov

Take small steps to get healthy: www.smallstep.gov

Local Farmers' Markets (summer and fall)

Harlem Hospital Greenmarket*
136th St. and Lenox Ave.
Thursdays 8:00 am – 4:00 pm

Union Settlement Farmers' Market
E. 104th St. and 3rd Ave.
Thursdays 8:00 am – 4:00 pm

Mt. Sinai Greenmarket*
99th St. and Madison Ave.
Fridays 8:00 am – 4:00 pm

La Marqueta Market
E. 115th St. and Park Ave.
Wednesday and Saturdays 8:00 am – 6:00 pm

Harlem Renaissance Lenox Ave. Market*
Lenox Ave. and 111th St.
Saturdays 8:00 am – 4:00 pm

Harlem Renaissance State Office Building*
W. 125th St. and Adam Clayton Powell Blvd.
Tuesdays 8:00 am – 4:00 pm

* Electronic benefit transfer (EBT)
accepted

Neighborhood Reports

To help reduce health disparities and improve the health of all New Yorkers, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) established 3 District Public Health Offices in 2003. These offices target public health efforts and resources to New York City neighborhoods with the highest rates of illness and premature death—the South Bronx, East and Central Harlem, and North and Central Brooklyn.

This neighborhood report was prepared by the East and Central Harlem District Public Health Office. We hope this report fosters dialogue and collaboration among our many partners, including other city agencies, community-based organizations, hospitals and clinics, businesses, elected officials, and, most important, the New Yorkers who live and work in East and Central Harlem.

For more information on the District Public Health Offices: nyc.gov/health/dpho