

## TO MARKET, TO MARKET<sup>1</sup>

Michelle Venetucci Harvey<sup>©</sup>

Farmers' markets are not just for the privileged. There's a lot of talk about the socio-economic privilege required to participate in alternative food movements. From Whole Foods' nickname of "Whole Paycheck" to the lack of government subsidies going towards organic food, healthy eating is often considered an elitist luxury. So when efforts are made to cross the bridge between underprivileged communities and access to healthy food, it's time to put down your locally-grown carrot for a minute and take note.

In a new study, *Real Food, Real Choice: Connecting SNAP Recipients with Farmers Markets*,<sup>2</sup> the Farmers Market Coalition and the Community Food Security Coalition show that Oregon has the highest percentage of farmers' markets that cater to people participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. While California is ahead when it comes to the total number of SNAP-savvy farmers' markets at 51, this accounts for a measly 10 percent of their total farmers' markets in the state. Northwest states do better on market saturation. Coming in at 41 percent of the total farmers' markets in the state, Oregon's stats show a commitment to accessible produce (although Washington is standing at a not-too-shabby 32 percent!).

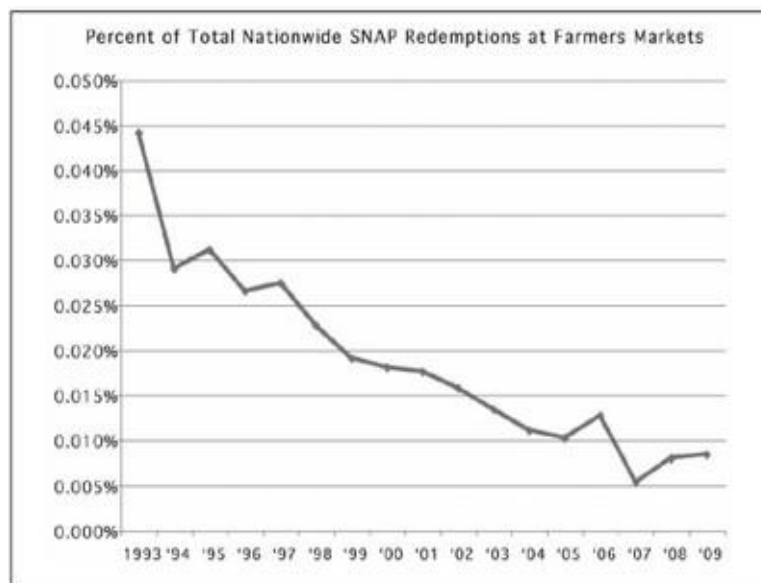


Chart from the *Real Food, Real Choice* report, used with permission.

This is great news! But as the chart above shows, even the increasing number of farmers' market SNAP redemptions is a minuscule part of the overall SNAP program. The steep decline seen in the graph is not completely explained in the report, due to a lack of research, but can be partially explained by the switch from paper coupons to Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) debit cards in

<sup>1</sup> Sightline Daily, The Daily Score, August 12, 2010

<sup>2</sup> *Real Food, Real Choice – Connecting SNAP Recipients with Farmers Markets*, Suzanne Briggs, Andy Fisher, Megan Lott, Stacy Miller and Nell Tessman. Community Food Security Coalition, Farmers Market Coalition, June 2010

1996. While this switch achieved a less stigmatized shopping experience where debit card technology was already in use, it meant that markets had to contend with new technology and staffing that many could not handle. But awareness, training, and in some cases, state subsidized EBT machines are on the rise, and markets are embracing this path to social sustainability. If this is the case, why aren't more people utilizing such a fresh, healthy source of food? The report offers some insight.

**Price and Perception:** OK, we get that organic food is usually more expensive than conventional. It's not hard to imagine why most SNAP participants—heck, almost everybody—might perceive farmers' markets to be more expensive than other food sources. And while there isn't a whole lot of research comparing actual prices, there's some evidence that the price of market products often decreases when there's a direct farmer-to-consumer connection. Without the middleman to split costs with, market prices can be lower and more consistent than grocery store items.

**Access, Hours, and Convenience:** Inconvenient hours and location can be big deterrents to shopping at a farmers' market, especially if you are working multiple jobs or juggling work and child care. Markets also do not cater to people who need one-stop shopping; there aren't usually stands selling household staples like paper towels and laundry detergent, for example. One way to reduce this inconvenience is to increase the number of farmers' markets in an area. The Seattle Farmers Market Alliance boasts seven markets, some of which are open on weekends while others take place on weekday afternoons. It's not a complete answer, but it gives shoppers some extra flexibility.

**Cultural Barriers:** Perceptions play a big role in shopping routines, and if immigrants or people from minority ethnic groups feel that they won't be able to communicate, they may favor the relative anonymity of grocery stores. There is also the issue of culturally appropriate foods being offered; some minority groups might favor stores that import products from other countries. Although the report dishes up a hefty 77 pages of data, I was left with some questions. Just who are the SNAP participants shopping at farmers' markets and what demographics do they represent? While the report summarizes the demographics of SNAP participants in general, it seems to treat farmers' market-frequenting EBT users as one giant, homogenous group. How many of them have children? How many are recent immigrants? How many come from historically marginalized communities vs. the recently unemployed middle class? Distinctions are key to understanding how markets can create a more inclusive space for EBT users.

At the end of the day, shopping at a farmers' market is still a political act. Market shoppers are supporting local food systems, small farmers, organic production, and seasonal eating, and the growing number of shoppers gives markets the flexibility to explore programs like SNAP. So when you feel good about getting your apples directly from the source, remember that you are also supporting this service for a SNAP participant in your neighborhood.

*News update: The Senate and House recently passed two pieces of legislation that will allocate \$26 billion for Medicaid and educational funding, and President Obama signed it on August 10th. To pay for this all? Cutting almost \$12 billion from the SNAP program. Some say this is warranted because of last year's stimulus boost to the program, but many are outraged at this attempt to take from the poor to give to the, well, poor.*