

Let Bodegas Be Bodegas

Dory Thrasher

A new rule proposed by the US Department of Agriculture would impose new stocking rules on food stores that accept SNAP benefits, requiring them to carry more perishable and healthy food. This requirement would primarily affect small convenience stores. Dory Thrasher argues that this intervention, despite its beneficent intentions, is unlikely to transform the nutrition environment for low-income households.

In February, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed a rule change¹ for stores that accept SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps). The new rules require a greater array of “healthy food options.” Currently, stores must stock three types of items in four categories: dairy, produce, breads, and meat/poultry/fish. The new rules expand that to seven varieties in each category, with an added requirement of perishable food in at least three (USDA 2016; Grossman 2016). This change would primarily affect corner stores or bodegas—a category of food retail that isn’t known for carrying a wide variety of fresh food. Supermarkets and grocery stores are likely already in compliance.



A “healthy bodegas” checklist from New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Health
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¹ See: <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FNS-2016-0018-0001>.

The argument for the change is that low-income neighborhoods with high numbers of SNAP recipients have fewer places to buy fresh food, and since \$3.5 billion of SNAP were spent at convenience stores in 2015² (out of a total \$69 billion in SNAP dollars redeemed), shops would rather increase their produce, meat, dairy, and bread supplies than lose out on that income. The counterargument made by store owners and industry groups is that the new requirements are too onerous and will cause small stores to drop out of the SNAP program altogether, leaving low-income shoppers with fewer options, not more.³

Comments uploaded to *regulations.gov* during the open-comment period on the rule exhibit beautiful rhetorical strategies from both sides. A dietetic intern writes, “I support the adoption of the proposed changes, as I feel that these regulations will provide SNAP recipients with greater access to nutrient-dense foods to be prepared at home.”⁴

On the opposition side, store operators argue that the regulations will make it difficult or impossible to do business. A Circle K manager warns that the new rule will “jeopardize [his] future participation in SNAP,” calls the required number of items required to be stocked “unworkable,” and reminds the USDA of the simple truth that “Convenience stores pride themselves on selling the products that people want to buy, and offering those products for sale in a manner that is convenient for consumers in terms of both location and hours of service.”^{5,6}



Graffiti outside a bodega in Bedford–Stuyvesant, Brooklyn © Dory Thrasher

² See: www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/snap/2015-SNAP-Retailer-Management-Year-End-Summary.pdf.

³ See: www.cspdailynews.com/category-news/services/articles/many-c-stores-will-exit-snap-if-rules-change.

⁴ See: <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FNS-2016-0018-0109>.

⁵ See: <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FNS-2016-0018-0895>.

⁶ It is clear that convenience-store industry groups have offered templates for commenters to use. For instance, one letter fails to delete text that says “INSERT BACKGROUND ON YOU AND YOUR COMPANY”—see here: <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FNS-2016-0018-0255>.

Before this national push, local public-health programs across the United States focused on increasing the variety and quality of food sold at convenience stores as a way to improve neighborhood food access. These programs, known as Healthy Corner Stores⁷ initiatives, push convenience stores to stock fresh fruit and vegetables in order to expand food access in underserved neighborhoods. Such initiatives rest on an assumption that proximity to fresh produce is the deciding factor in a healthy diet. Some public-health research suggests that distance from supermarkets is correlated with elevated levels of obesity and attendant negative health outcomes (Morland, Diez Roux and Wing 2006; Black *et al.* 2010; Bodor *et al.* 2010; Viola *et al.* 2013). Morland, Diez Roux and Wing (2006) note that the presence of convenience stores, in particular, predicted higher levels of obesity and overweight. The USDA’s proposed rule change is a wholehearted embrace of this logic, which is unsurprising given their publication of the interactive “Food Access Research Atlas”.⁸ This tool, formerly known as the “Food Desert Locator,” allows users to view and map low-income census tracts that are far from supermarkets.

The process of bringing supermarkets into underserved areas is difficult and, despite some tax incentive programs, not entirely within policymakers’ control. In this context, projects to reshape existing food stores—primarily bodegas—to fill the food-access gap are quick to implement, require no construction, and are customizable for different neighborhoods. Still, the underlying assumption that proximity to food is the defining characteristic of a healthy diet requires challenge and critique. In 2013, I undertook research on programs to improve access to healthy food in New York’s underserved neighborhoods. One of the programs I looked at was Shop Healthy, NYC’s version of a “healthy corner store” initiative (Kornfeld 2015). What I learned is that such programs don’t work to transform the food environment, for three major reasons: they ignore what bodegas are for, disregard their business model, and ultimately communicate disrespect to residents of so-called food deserts.

Ignoring what bodegas are for

The USDA revised rules and “healthy corner store” programs mischaracterize what bodegas are for. People of all income brackets see bodegas as places to get chips, candy, beer, soda, lottery tickets, perhaps a sandwich, or last-minute goods like milk or a can of beans. They are not places to do significant grocery shopping because their selection is small and their prices are higher than full-line supermarkets. Residents of low-income neighborhoods, like most people, prefer to do their grocery shopping at supermarkets. People in the neighborhoods I studied took public transit or shared rides to supermarkets with good prices and selection.

One case where a bodega improvement was deemed successful by NYC Department of Health (DOH) employees highlights the limitations of the initiative: a bodega near a school began stocking low-sugar granola bars and displaying them prominently so that students could easily purchase a healthy snack. By no means does a granola bar display “transform the food environment” and abate the conditions that contribute to health disparities. It does, however, recognize what a bodega is for: a place to grab something quick and easy.

Disregarding the bodega business model

Bodega owners are keenly sensitive to consumer demand given their tight shelf space, and anything that gets in the way of staying in the black is eyed with reasonable suspicion. So it was not surprising when DOH employees rued that bodegas that had been rearranged to highlight healthy items soon slid back to their old ways, with cake in coolers meant for fresh fruit and signs declaring “Shop Healthy Here!” pointing to bags of chips. Shop Healthy and similar programs disregard the

⁷ Website: www.healthycornerstores.org.

⁸ Website: www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx.

way that bodega owners make their living, which is selling familiar, often shelf-stable products that customers are sure to buy. Discouraging the sale of unhealthy food directly attacks the bottom line of these small businesses.



Offerings at a deli in the Mantua section of West Philadelphia © Laura Wolf-Powers

Disrespect to residents

While conducting research, I had many conversations with residents about their food shopping priorities. Price was the number one concern. Residents told me about reading supermarket circulars, traveling to multiple stores, and sharing information about sales and deals. They also desired quality produce and clean stores, and complained about local shops that had wilted or moldy vegetables, messy and disorganized displays, and flies. Proximity was rarely raised as an issue. Knowing this, requiring bodegas to stock seven rather than four types of lackluster vegetables will change very little. It continues to imply that because someone is poor, bodega produce is the best they can hope for, and that they should be happy with—or at least accepting of—resources that are significantly less good than those enjoyed by better-off New Yorkers.

Challenging the proximity hypothesis: let bodegas be bodegas

The proximity hypothesis, while compelling, has been challenged and shot down by researchers who found that people routinely travel to buy groceries in search of good prices and quality food (Alkon *et al.* 2013; Shannon 2013; Shannon 2014; McMillan 2014), and by those who have found no clear relationship between supermarket prevalence and health outcomes (Boone-Heinonen *et al.* 2011; Handbury, Rahkovsky and Schnell 2015). What is needed are policy prescriptions that address the causes of food insecurity, not just the spatial mismatch between food shoppers and food stores (Wolf-Powers 2015).

My recommendation is simple: let bodegas be bodegas. Attempts to pressure them into becoming small healthy-food stores benefit neither customers nor owners. This suggestion, however, does not address the important task of improving food access, a decidedly more difficult policy problem.

Perhaps the simplest solution is to make more money available for grocery shopping, wherever people choose to do it. This would alleviate some of the constraints on low-income people who must balance nutrition and cost (Food Research and Action Center 2011; Alkon *et al.* 2013). This can be done through a combination of increased SNAP allotments and efforts to boost employment and raise the minimum wage. Second, departments of health, transportation, and city planning can work together to reduce travel costs and time for those who leave their neighborhoods to buy groceries. Third, the USDA must find a way for SNAP to be used online and cities must ensure that grocery-delivery companies like FreshDirect deliver to all parts of the city. Fourth, store improvement must be focused on the sub-par supermarkets that residents complain about, helping those owners to renovate and make inventory and aesthetic improvements without raising food prices.

Not all of the comments in response of the USDA's proposed rule change are moralizing dietetic interns or stores trying to protect their status quo. The chairman of the Durham County Board of Health in North Carolina wrote a letter⁹ reflecting on his department's work with small-store owners to improve food quality. He points out that while small stores have been willing partners, his department has become aware of barriers including the time it takes to change shopping behavior, a lack of affordable distribution infrastructure for corner stores, and a lack of storage space that would permit small stores to buy in bulk to keep prices down and keep required items in stock at all times.

This letter shows that is possible for groups interested in expanding food access to support the ideas behind a "healthy corner store" initiative, without insisting on punitive measures that hurt small-store owners trying to keep their small-margin businesses afloat. Food access is a real concern, but let bodegas be bodegas as we find better, less patronizing, solutions to the problem.

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