

BEYOND THE FOOD: FARMERS' MARKETS, SUBSIDIES, AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Farmers' markets are often thought of as catering to high-income families, but recent policy experiments suggest they can also reduce household food insecurity among those with lower incomes

Nearly 1 in 6 Canadian households experienced inadequate or insecure access to food in 2021, and those with lower incomes were at a particularly high risk. These households are known to have lower quality diets and suffer from a range of adverse physical, social, and mental health challenges. Policies aimed at supporting food insecure households have long focused on food banks and other charitable food assistance programs and while these responses are able to address acute food shortages they are not able to relieve food insecurity.

At the same time there has been a rise in not just the number of farmers' markets in Canada, but how policy makers have sought to leverage these food sources to improve the diets of lower income families. The British Columbia (BC) Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program (FMNCP) is the longest-running food subsidy program of its type in Canada. The FMNCP provides low income households with coupons to purchase a range of healthy foods from farmers' markets over a 16 week period.

The figure, drawn from our research, shows the results of this policy intervention by tracking changes in Healthy Eating Index-2015 (HEI-2015) scores for participating adults. The HEI-2015 is a measure of diet quality that reflects adherence to the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Our research found that the FMNCP did not improve the diet quality of participants; however, it did reduce food insecurity by 79% and this reduction was sustained 16 weeks post-program. The sustained reduction in household food insecurity may indicate that participants preserved foods purchased during the program, or that social connections they formed during the program enhanced their access to other helpful resources after the program ended.

We also found that parents who participated in the FMNCP often shielded their children from food insecurity by compromising their own intake to ensure sufficient

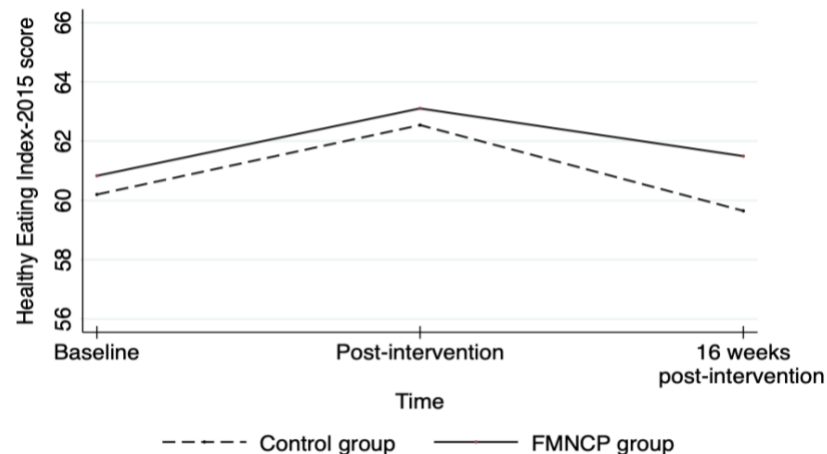


Figure. Healthy Eating Index-2015 scores at baseline (0 weeks), post-intervention (10-15 weeks), and 16 weeks post-intervention (26-31 weeks). FMNCP, Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program

food for their children. It is therefore also possible that children experienced greater dietary benefits from the program than their parents. Finally, there was also a non-significant trend towards improved mental well-being and sense of community among adult participants.

The FMNCP reduced experiences and severity of household food insecurity. While the coupons did not significantly improve diet quality, the trends toward improved mental well-being and sense of community are promising

Ultimately, the root causes of household food insecurity are multifactorial, and therefore no single policy or program can resolve it. Actions at all levels and across all sectors are needed to ensure households have adequate income to purchase food and other necessities. In this way, healthy food subsidies can be one important piece of a comprehensive policy package to address household food insecurity in Canada.