



To: Interested Parties  
From: Margie Omero, Momentum Analysis  
Re: Findings from recent focus groups on hunger  
Date: August 18, 2012

**Methodology:** Momentum Analysis conducted four focus groups: two in Chicago and two in Houston July 25-26, 2012. One Chicago group was of upscale white women and the other of African-American women. One Houston group was of downscale white women and the other of Latina women. Participants were active in cooking and/or food preparation for their household and came from a mix of age, parental, marital status and party identification. Participants were paid for their participation. Focus group findings cannot be quantified onto the population at large.

Our recent focus groups show women are deeply concerned about the quality, accessibility, and affordability of food. And whatever differences women may have in how they perceive government assistance programs, there is near consensus that feeding hungry children, and giving them nutrition education, should be top priorities. Below are key findings, with select relevant quotes appended.

**Food is plentiful, but by the same token, also overwhelming and fattening.**

When we ask respondents to use one word to describe food in this country, almost to a person they cite words like "overwhelming," "fattening," "large portions," and "unhealthy." But by the same token, overwhelming can also be "plentiful," and large portions can also be "cheap." As one participant says, "If you go to a restaurant now you can split portions with someone else and it's cheap." Overwhelming food is also abundant food. Some marvel at the diversity of food, and that stores "never run out of anything" and "you don't have to ration."

**Although participants also note healthy food is simply not available in many communities.**

However, despite the sense that food is abundant, there is clear concern that healthy food in particular is not available in many communities. While "food desert" is a term that comes up more in our upscale group, participants across the board worry about access to quality food. Minority women in particular talk about this experience first-hand.

**“Hunger” is not top of mind, as the word itself connotes homelessness.**

The word "hunger" connotes homelessness. Several participants tell of hungry people they've met along the way, while volunteering, helping a regular panhandler, or helping feed a hungry neighboring family. No one thinks of themselves as hungry, even those respondents currently on SNAP. Hunger, in their view, affects other people.

**But without a doubt there is food insecurity.**

Yet food insecurity of some sort pervades in every group we conducted. Beyond just our SNAP recipient participants, quite a few tell stories of their struggles providing food for their families, or buying the cheapest possible food they can find. And almost every participant can detail how they use coupons, sales, price-matching, and other strategies to make their grocery dollars stretch farther.

**And there is rampant concern about the cost of fresher or healthier options.**

The idea that healthy food is expensive food pervades all groups. For some, Whole Foods in particular is synonymous with healthy, and as Whole Foods becomes out of reach (financially or geographically), so does eating healthy. Quite a few note they can buy a quick meal for just a few dollars at a fast food drive-thru, but buying healthy food costs much more.

**So government assistance, however imperfect, is needed.**

So given the above (hunger, food insecurity, and some cost/accessibility challenges to eating), participants see a need for government assistance, or SNAP (which many still call food stamps). While some worry about abuses of the program (more on that below), even the most conservative participants don't want to see the program completely eliminated. This is particularly true when children are involved.

**Even as women have several different perceptions of abuse.**

There are different perceptions of abuse of SNAP. Some worry about recipients trying to get out of working, instead "sitting on their rear ends all day," as one downscale Houstonian puts it. There is also worry about SNAP being used responsibly; several cite expensive cuts of beef, shrimp, crab, and lobster as items they feel aren't appropriate for SNAP.

It's very much worth noting that SNAP beneficiaries themselves feel others abuse the program that they themselves truly need. These participants worry someone has an easier time getting benefits than they do.

**Women come together with near universal support for providing kids with better food, school breakfasts, and nutrition education**

One topic on which nearly all participants agree is providing better food and nutrition education to kids. Universal School Breakfast sounds like a good idea, they said, because it will "remove the stigma" and because "breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

Providing nutrition education over the course of multiple years also resonates because it can help "break the cycle" of families without strong nutrition. In every group, participants told stories of learning how to eat from their mothers, and hoping to pass down nutrition awareness or cooking skills to their own children. A few even admit their grown daughters or daughter-in-laws now tell them what to eat.

Women prioritize improving access to quality, affordable food. And these women oppose balancing the budget at the expense of assistance to feed the hungry, even if they also feel assistance programs need retooling. Many have personally experienced food insecurity themselves, and the cost of food drives many of their own personal choices. And across the board, women spend quite a lot of time strategizing, shopping, and thinking about their food purchasing decisions.

## SELECT VERBATIM QUOTES

**Food is plentiful, but by the same token, also overwhelming and fattening.**

*Plentiful. I think it's a good thing. You can go anywhere and buy anything, you don't have to ration. You couldn't do that when we were kids. But you can go to any store today and get anything you want. I think it's a good thing.*

– Upscale/Chicago

*Since I love to cook I'd much rather cook a meal than go through a drive through for my family. I like that you can go to a grocery store and there are ten different kinds of apples or there are twenty different kinds of tomatoes and you can pick which ones you want for your ingredients and in the food that you're cooking.*

– Downscale/Houston

*Lots of cholesterol. Everything that's good is high in fat. For example, macaroni and cheese. You have to watch how much fat or how much cholesterol. It's really hard to find a food that isn't high in cholesterol. I was thinking about going vegan, because food is dangerous. It can be.*

–Afr-Amer/Chicago

*[Food in this country] is too fattening. Unhealthy. Convenient. There is a fast food restaurant on every corner of this city. Too salty.*

– Downscale/Houston

**Although participants also note healthy food is simply not available in many communities.**

*Accessibility is a challenge. There is Whole Foods in Sugarland and two in Montrose. There is not that many health food stores. And where they are they tend to be in places where the affluent live and it's easily accessible for them but it's not for us.*

– Latina/Houston

*I think in cases where there's food deserts though, there's often not any money to spend on food. And there's no Whole Foods or Dominick's for miles & miles. On the north shore, where there's chips, or juice boxes or pop, that's the only option. So these poor kids grow up not even knowing what vegetables look like.*

–Upscale/Chicago

*I think there are a lot of places where you can get food. I think there is more an issue with the nutrition and availability. You go to the poorer neighborhoods, you don't have a grocery store. Park Forest, I live down South, they don't have a grocery store. They have a food co-op that is taking place now but it was sad cause there is not a grocery store. So I don't think the poorer neighborhoods don't have the availability that some of the richer neighborhoods have.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

**“Hunger” is not top of mind, as the word itself connotes homelessness.**

*I think that being a civilized country we don't want people on the streets. To try and curb as many homeless people on the streets dying and not eating. That's what happens in third world countries. It doesn't have to be lobster or a palace to live in, but people should at the bare minimum have something to eat, someplace to stay, and if they get sick some sort of doctor to fix them.*

– Upscale/Chicago

*Me and my husband would drive down Cottage Grove at 71<sup>st</sup> and there was this homeless man and we would notice he would be there every morning and he would never try to beg for food. He was just sleeping there. And I think the first time was around Thanksgiving, I brought him a plate of everything and he thanked me so much and it got to the point where every Monday I would bring him something but he wasn't looking for anything. My husband gave him a pair of gym shoes and the policemen saw what we were doing and they took him in and let him sleep in there.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

**But without a doubt there is food insecurity.**

*I have children. I have to feed my children. My main priority is to feed my children. To make sure they have food, a roof over their head, that's my concern. In the city we live in, keep them safe the best I can. Keep them fed and safe.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

*There are times when being a single mom you can't go out and afford to buy three hot dogs for a dollar when you can get ten packets of ramen noodles for a dollar. There are times you are so broke you have to live on that. Macaroni & cheese is cheap and ramen noodles is cheap. But you can't go hungry.*

– Downscale/Houston

*When I was a kid, we didn't have a house or have a car so the best meals we had were at school.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

**And there is rampant concern about the cost of fresher or healthier options.**

*It's not convenient. You can go to McDonald's drive thru and get a cheeseburger for \$3. But if you want something healthy, you have to go to Whole foods and spend \$100, and go home and cook it.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

*It's expensive to eat healthy. I used to go to Whole Foods all the time for organic food and to buy in bulk. But now I can't believe how expensive it is and I can't afford it anymore.*

– Downscale/Houston

*Junk food and fast food are much more cheaper than health food. Because you would spend much more money in a health food store than you would getting cheaper food.*

– Upscale/Chicago

*Foods that are not healthy are the cheapest. Macaroni and cheese is cheaper than a piece of beef.*

– Downscale/Houston

*I think if healthy food was priced the same as unhealthy food more people would eat healthy.*

– Downscale/Houston

*We do have healthy food, but it's very expensive. All the organic stuff is expensive.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

*I make a little game out of it [food shopping], with the coupons, and I plan menus. I used to hate shopping too, and about 10 years ago I just made a shift. I shop alone, I'm single too. But I don't have problem going because I have a ritual. [The goal] is to save money. And because Jewel has a lot of great*

*coupons and they have a lot of specials. And I do go to Whole Foods too but I'm always a little disappointed in what I get because I think it's overpriced compared to Trader Joe's.*

– Upscale/Chicago

**So government assistance, however imperfect, is needed.**

*The food stamp program shouldn't be cut because there are so many needy people that need food and I think that is a priority.*

– Latina/Houston

*There are people who really need it. There are these many people who really need it, and these many people who abuse it. There needs to be some oversight.*

– Upscale/Chicago

*I think there are people that need food stamps but I think there are people that sit on their rear ends all day long that watch TV that could go out and get a job. And I'm tired of paying for other peoples stuff just like I hate Obamacare.*

– Downscale/Houston

*[Corporate philanthropy] could assist government but I don't think it will replace it.*

– Downscale/Houston

**Even as women have several different perceptions of abuse.**

*I think it's abused. I think people like your average middle-class working adult sometimes you only make enough money to pay for your necessities and then when it comes time to buy for your groceries you don't have enough money but if you go and apply for food stamps you don't get it because your gross income is too much. But you can turn around and see someone who doesn't work but drive a better car than you and can get \$600 a month in food stamps.*

– Downscale/Houston

*I was working at the University of Chicago hospital. I was there for 31 years. They laid me off three years ago. I didn't even see it coming. I was able to get my severance and I had just bought a truck and I paid all that up. I have a bladder disease and lumbar spinal stenosis. Two years ago I was at my lowest and I'm not afraid to admit I really tried to commit suicide because bills were piling up, my husband's on disability and I prayed to God and everybody kept saying go try to get [assistance] and I went there being truthful. They told me no. I didn't know what else to do. I was borrowing from people. I can't lie and look at you in the eye. They made me go back and tell them that my husband left me, he took everything, I had nothing, and that I was about to lose my house and I got a link card. And I said this is a shame that you had to lie in order to get this.*

– Afr-Amer/Chicago

*A lot of people that get government assistance, abuse it. They are in lines at these food pantries. They know they are already getting [assistance] but they are greedy. They want both. They want to get their money and whatever else they can get for free.*

*– Afr-Amer/Chicago*

*I know someone who gets \$800 a month. One of my training buddy's daughter. She just doesn't want to work. She said, I'm not working because I'm not giving this up. and she gets child support from her ex husband. And you know what? She said, as long as I'm getting this, I'm not working. So I'm saying, go to school, learn a trade, get a job, and we'll still give it to you, but reduce it.*

*– Upscale/Chicago*

*They even have stores where you could buy cigarettes, diapers & alcohol. The store is in on it. In the lower poverty areas.*

*– Upscale/Chicago*

*You shouldn't be able to buy steak. Buy hamburger meat instead.*

*– Downscale/Houston*

*I was personally on food stamps and I got turned down once I started working again and like she said you go into a store and people are on their cell phones and pajamas and driving cars with 20 inch rims on them with their nails done and hair done. Even though I was on it, I felt it was abused cause I was sitting there struggling and they were turning me down as someone who pays my taxes and works all the time versus someone who was not working. And I didn't get help from the government.*

*– Downscale/Houston*

*Prime example, I was at a neighborhood Walmart, paying for my food and this lady turned around and she was like if you give me cash I'll let you get an extra five dollars for [my food stamps]. And I was like no.*

*– Downscale/Houston*

*[My neighbor] told me she was getting food stamps and I was like how could you be getting food stamps? You are living in a \$200,000 house and you have three cars over there but they didn't know her husband was working in Wisconsin. Every pay check got sent back to the house but she would lie to them and say he's not living there.*

*– Downscale/Houston*

**Women come together with near universal support for providing kids with better food, school breakfasts, and nutrition education**

*Everyone is offered a breakfast here. When they've eaten breakfast, children learn better, test better, and pay more attention because they are not hungry.*

– Latina/Houston

*This way you catch everyone in the net. Maybe some of them don't need to be there, but you're not stigmatizing it.*

– Upscale/Chicago

*You have kids that have to ride the bus and their parents are gone in the morning. So if they don't eat at home they'll just eat at lunch. But if they offer it at school, then it's there.*

– Downscale/Houston

*Kids bring [nutrition education] home with them too. My son went back and told his teacher that his father and I did drugs because beer is a drug mommy. On the same token, he said you know we really aren't supposed to be eating these kinds of things and I said you are absolutely right, you are so smart. And they are sponges and they like to share everything that they learn so they bring those things home and also teach the parents that might not have been so educated.*

– Latina/Houston

*It should be a priority and start when they are really young and be consistent throughout. I think nutrition in school is great for kids whose parents don't know anything about nutrition. At least that is one way they can break the cycle.*

– Downscale/Houston

*I think the only time the government should really pay attention is if it's children.*

– Downscale/Houston