

TURNING FOOD DESERTS INTO OASES

Why New York's Public Housing Should Encourage Commercial Development

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About the Author



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From 1987 through 2006, Husock was director of case studies in public policy and management at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he was also a fellow at the Hauser Center on Nonprofit Organizations. His publications on the nonprofit sector have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Affairs*, *New York Times*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Society*, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and *Public Interest*. Husock has written widely on U.S. housing and urban policy, including in his book *The Trillion-Dollar Housing Mistake: The Failure of American Housing Policy* (2003) and his monograph *Repairing the Ladder: Toward a New Housing Policy Paradigm* (1996). His work has appeared in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *Philanthropy*, and *The Wilson Quarterly*.

A former broadcast journalist and documentary filmmaker whose work won three Emmy Awards, Husock serves on the board of directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He holds a B.A. from Boston University's School of Public Communication and was a 1981–82 mid-career fellow at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

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Executive Summary

Concern about ways to combat health problems affecting low-income Americans has included concern about areas with insufficient access to fresh food at reasonable prices, so-called food deserts. New York City has, for almost a decade, pursued a policy based on tax and zoning incentives to attract supermarkets to such low-income areas, which often include public housing.

Yet unlike neighborhood commercial districts, where sites for new supermarkets may be difficult to assemble, public-housing properties and the land on which they stand are owned by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)—potentially reducing the hurdles. Indeed, more supermarkets and other retail stores on NYCHA properties could improve the health of residents, enhance public safety, and help the dire finances of America's largest public-housing authority.

This report finds that:

- 180 of NYCHA's properties are located in areas classified by the city as "underserved" (i.e., having less than 3 square feet of supermarket floor space per capita), with some large NYCHA properties located more than half a mile from the nearest supermarket.
- New commercial development, particularly supermarkets, on NYCHA properties could improve access to fresh food for low-income residents and increase retail-rental revenue for NYCHA, which faces a major maintenance-repair backlog.
- New retail-rental development on the 50 NYCHA properties that are already eligible for special zoning incentives would likely yield an additional \$6 million–\$19 million in annual revenue to the city.

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Why New York’s Public Housing Should Encourage Commercial Development

I. Introduction*

Since 2009, New York City has offered financial and zoning incentives, through its Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) program,¹ to boost access to one of life’s most basic needs: fresh food. “A widespread shortage of neighborhood grocery stores and supermarkets exists in New York City,” observed a 2008 city report. “Low-income neighborhoods have the highest need.”²

Progress has been slow; only 11 new supermarkets have opened in eligible areas.³ Yet a major reason for the supermarket shortage affecting New York’s poorest residents has gone unacknowledged and unaddressed: since 1944, NYCHA has generally excluded commercial development, including supermarkets, from its 328 public-housing developments.⁴

In New York City, 19 community districts, covering every borough except Staten Island, currently suffer from a supermarket shortage—defined by the city as having less than 3 square feet of supermarket floor space per capita⁵—that is dire enough to merit zoning and tax incentives to encourage new supermarket development. Within those 19 districts are 180 NYCHA properties, including some of America’s largest public-housing developments: Cypress Hills (pop. 3,400) in Brooklyn, more than half a mile from a supermarket; South Jamaica (pop. 2,380) in Queens, a third of a mile from a supermarket; and Manhattanville (pop. 3,055) in Manhattan, also a third of a mile from a supermarket.⁶

“New Yorkers,” observes the city’s Department of City Planning, “are more likely to walk [than drive] to their local grocery store.”⁷ Like other New Yorkers, NYCHA residents, many of whom are elderly, typically walk (or take public transport) to do their shopping. The difference: NYCHA residents typically must exert far greater effort to do basic food shopping.

Encouraging commercial development—including supermarkets, drugstores, and other retail services—on NYCHA properties would provide a valuable amenity for some of New York's poorest residents. It would also result in significant new rental-tax revenue for NYCHA, which currently faces a severe maintenance-repair backlog of \$6 billion–\$17 billion.⁸ (Because of this backlog, faulty heating and faulty elevator service, among other problems, plague NYCHA properties, which are experiencing “accelerating deterioration,” according to Community Service Society, a nonprofit.)⁹

This report examines the extent to which NYCHA residents lack convenient access to supermarkets; it reviews why commercial development has historically been prohibited on NYCHA properties; and it assesses the potential benefits of allowing widespread commercial development on NYCHA properties.

II. NYCHA's Historical Anticommercial Bias

NYCHA is America's largest public-housing authority.¹⁰ Its mission: to provide “decent and affordable housing in a safe and secure living environment for low- and moderate-income residents throughout the five boroughs.”¹¹ NYCHA owns and operates 328 properties that house some 400,000 residents;¹² another 200,000 New Yorkers live in NYCHA-administered buildings, via Section 8 housing vouchers.

The city's public-housing system dates to the 1930s and the administration of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. In NYCHA's early days, its properties included some commercial development: in 1944, for instance, there were 759 retail stores and 17,000 apartments. In that year, however, NYCHA sharply reduced the number of stores on its properties, demolishing 599 of them.¹³

Henceforth, no new commercial development would be allowed on NYCHA properties. As the *New York Times* stated in 1944: “Under a slum clearance policy emphasizing its determination to keep strictly in the field of low-rent housing and out of commerce, the New York City Housing Authority has decided to provide no stores in its vast post-war building

projects, and intends to reduce the retail space even in its existing housing centers to the ‘irreducible minimum.’”¹⁴

NYCHA's decision was influenced by numerous factors. It faced considerable public pressure to construct and operate as many new housing units as possible during the immediate postwar housing shortage. In addition, “new limits on retail development in the federal [public-housing] program and opposition by [local] real estate interests to the idea of city-owned commercial space convince[d] NYCHA to dispense with most retail in the future.”¹⁵

Urban planners of that era also tended to hold a stark anticommercial bias. In NYCHA's 1940 ribbon-cutting ceremony for its Queensbridge property, for example, prominent NYCHA board member Mary Simhovich conceded that NYCHA properties could include nonprofit uses, such as health centers.¹⁶

Yet the fact that no commercial development would be included “reflected [Simhovich's] retention of Progressive era anxieties about the role of the saloon in working-class city life.... She believed that saloons were hotbeds of alcoholism, sensuality, venereal disease, violence and corruption that disrupted families and neighborhoods.... In new public housing ... one looked in vain for bars, and commercial activity of most kinds.”¹⁷

In addition to such Progressive-era moral paternalism, New York's urban planners were convinced that the appropriate model—inspired by the influential Swiss architect Le Corbusier—for public housing was that of “towers in the park.” Le Corbusier visited New York in 1935 and “sketched Manhattan blocks recombined into megablocks. Oversized and formally idealized skyscrapers were placed in the middle and surrounded by a continuous green park.”¹⁸

Le Corbusier's vision became reality in New York's postwar public housing. Largely implemented by Robert Moses, the city's legendary park and highway planner, NYCHA properties bear Le Corbusier's heavy imprint: mid-rise and high-rise apartment buildings tower over austere green spaces that are encircled by chain-link fence, with pedestrian walkways crisscrossing the properties—and no commercial development.

Critiques of the quality of life in NYCHA properties, as well as in U.S. public housing generally, have long mentioned their lack of retail development. In her landmark 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, urban-planning visionary Jane Jacobs writes powerfully about what still is true in New York: “The projects that today most urgently need salvaging are low-income housing projects. Their failures drastically affect the everyday lives of many people, especially children. Moreover, because they are too dangerous, demoralizing and unstable within themselves, they make it too hard in many cases to maintain tolerable civilization in their vicinities.”¹⁹

Today, as in Jacobs’s day, crime rates are disproportionately high in NYCHA properties.²⁰ Her prescriptions for “unslumming” public housing specifically include “new street uses and street buildings”—including retail uses. “The general aim should be to bring in uses different from residence, because lack of enough mixed uses is precisely one of the causes of deadness, danger and plain inconvenience.... Almost any kind of work use would be especially valuable; also evening uses and general commerce, particularly if these will draw good cross-use from outside the project’s former boundaries.”²¹

Oscar Newman, architect, design critic, and author of the influential 1972 book *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, states:

Mrs. Jacobs reserves her most scornful judgments for the planners and builders of large scale public housing.

The large open spaces, the unsurveyable corners, the lack of diversity in public housing call forth her description of them as the “Blight of Dullness.”

Normal streets have a clear definition of public areas, semiprivate building zones and distinctly private apartment units. In many large housing developments, these demarcations are nonexistent. There is little or no differentiation between a sidewalk within a project and a lobby or even a hall corridor. At the same time there is insufficient surveillance in these areas to provide the advantages inherent in more diversified public streets.

In general, the design directives Mrs. Jacobs advocates for public housing would alter existing housing projects to conform to the urban street pattern. Stores could be included within their boundaries; play areas could be as close to apartments as possible; exposed galleries might be tried as a partial solution. But most of all, streets and their associated activity could be brought into the body of the project. The alleged serenity of trees and benches would give way to casual but uniquely exciting urban activities of all sorts.²²

In the 1990s, NYCHA itself undertook an internal study²³ that would propose new retail construction adjacent to, and on the grounds of, its Jacob Riis and Bernard Baruch properties on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. David Burney, a NYCHA architectural planner from that era, explains that the study’s proposal was motivated by the fact that Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village, middle-income housing developments located near NYCHA properties on Avenue D, incorporate retail stores. “As you go down Avenue D,” he says, “the street just dies because there’s no retail. We argued that there was a demonstrable market for it, and we proposed in-fill for the avenue and taking over the ground floor of the public-housing towers. The theory was there’d be no cost to NYCHA and the developer would make the capital investment and pay rent to the Authority.”²⁴ But the proposal never led to action.

III. NYCHA’s Food Deserts

In its 2008 report “Going to Market: New York City’s Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage,” New York’s Department of City Planning concluded that the city had only half the amount of supermarket square footage per 10,000 people required to ensure that a “full-service” supermarket²⁵ was within convenient walking distance in the typical “dense, pedestrian-oriented urban environment” that characterizes New York’s residential neighborhoods.²⁶

The report found low levels of supermarket access in all five boroughs, with the city’s target (30,000 square feet of supermarket floor space per 10,000 population) met in only two Manhattan communi-

ty districts. It recommended implementing special zoning and tax incentives to encourage supermarket development in the 19 community districts where access to supermarkets was particularly dire.²⁷

Today, more than half of all NYCHA properties fall within community districts that the city has deemed underserved. The 2008 report finds a significant overlap between areas of supermarket need and districts characterized by “diet-related diseases, such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease.”²⁸

NYCHA has repeatedly found that its residents do want more stores. For example, in “NextGeneration NYCHA: A Community Vision for the Van Dyke Houses,” NYCHA surveyed residents in that large Brooklyn property, which is 0.6 miles from the nearest supermarket. Residents, NYCHA reported, want to “use redevelopment to create affordable housing, retail stores, and services.”²⁹

In another NYCHA report, a resident of the Ingersoll Houses in Brooklyn complained that “elderly residents that have been here for years now have to travel blocks and blocks by walking or spending cab fare money on top of their grocery bill just to get some food.”³⁰ In yet another NYCHA study, a resident of the Mill Brook Houses in the Bronx lamented the “lack of fruit and vegetables in the neighborhood.”³¹ The study noted that a community garden in the Mill Brook Houses “is, in part, a response to the scarcity of stores that carry fresh fruit and vegetables in the vicinity of the community.”

When this author recently visited various NYCHA properties, he heard similar sentiments expressed by residents. At the Brownsville Houses in Brooklyn—a sprawling property that is home to 3,772 people in 1,338 apartments in 27 buildings³²—resident-council leader Carrie Scarboro decries the shortage of decent supermarkets in the neighborhood. “You bring the meat home and find that it’s spoiled,” she sighs.

The threat of gang violence and other criminal activity has even led many elderly NYCHA residents not to venture outside at all, says Brownsville property manager Mary Davis. Instead, they pay a premium to have groceries delivered. Davis adds that all Brownsville residents eagerly await

the arrival of a temporary food-pantry mobile unit, which parks curbside at the property twice a month.

At Brooklyn’s Van Dyke Houses, property manager Tijuana Higgins says that retail development there would be enthusiastically welcomed by residents. “Make it happen!” she urges. “We need it.” Notably, Van Dyke has large open areas that would be particularly conducive to new retail development (see photograph).



In addition to offering residents easier access to fresh food, supermarkets within public housing promise other benefits:

- ◆ **Less crime.** Higher levels of pedestrian traffic generated by the new supermarkets would not only reduce social isolation in public housing but would—in addition to the security staff that the city and stores themselves provided—increase the natural surveillance that passersby bring, an important plus in public housing, where crime is unusually high.
- ◆ **More revenue.** NYCHA’s 328 properties generate insufficient retail-rental income: only \$6 million in 2015, mostly from only a handful of properties.³³ Such meager revenue does little to help defray NYCHA’s annual \$60 million operating deficit or its multibillion dollar maintenance-repair backlog.

IV. Turning Food Deserts into Oases

NYCHA's 2008 report, "Going to Market," identifies "land availability" as the leading barrier to entry for new supermarkets. The report adds that "large sites are difficult to find and assemble" and that, in many areas, "zoning prohibits stores in excess of 10,000 feet ... except by special permit, which requires public review."

These barriers would be easier to surmount in public housing, where land is owned by the city and large open areas already exist. On NYCHA properties, high tenant dissatisfaction with inconvenient supermarket access would likely ease the public-review process.

To gauge private interest, NYCHA could issue requests for proposals for supermarkets in select properties. It could also deploy existing incentives that are already part of the city's FRESH program, which include zoning-density bonuses (which allow the construction of larger buildings than would be available for non-supermarket uses), easing of parking requirements (to facilitate the likely surge in pedestrian traffic), and tax reductions.

This author approached the principals of a major, relatively inexpensive, supermarket chain: Red Apple, which operates 30 supermarkets in New York City, including 15 in Brooklyn—a borough that is home to a significant number of NYCHA properties.³⁴ Red Apple chairman and CEO John Catsimatidis was quick to express qualified interest in operating and/or building supermarkets on NYCHA properties, with two specific preconditions: monthly rent should be based on a percentage of store revenue, not fixed in advance; and round-the-clock private security would be required. (The latter, he adds, could be factored into the rent—and, by ensuring the store's safety, would help attract employees.)

"We can be successful in neighborhoods that are very poor," Catsimatidis said. "Under the right conditions, we'd be willing to do it." Red Apple, he said, would consider both building and operating supermarkets on NYCHA properties if he believed that, should the enterprise not succeed, the buildings could be resold. If such buildings faced commercial streets with other

shops, he added, building and operating them would be even more attractive to private developers.

The possibility of public housing realizing significant revenue from commercial tenants is not hypothetical. Hong Kong, whose population of 7 million makes it of similar size to New York City, has an even larger inventory of public housing: more than 2 million people, or 29% of Hong Kong residents.³⁵

But each public-housing complex in Hong Kong includes retail development, thereby allowing the city's public-housing authority to run a fiscal surplus—in sharp contrast with NYCHA. In 2014–15, for example, its "commercial operations" generated a budget surplus of more than 1 million Hong Kong dollars. The Hong Kong Housing Authority says that it is "financially autonomous. Our massive public housing programmes are sustained through internally generated funds. Commercial Complexes [HKHA-owned retail spaces] are the biggest profit generators of all HKHA Commercial Operations."³⁶

V. How Much New Rent for NYCHA?

Although only a handful of new supermarkets have been built as a consequence of the FRESH incentive program, NYCHA is no longer officially hostile to commercial development. Indeed, NYCHA professes to want such development.

In its 2015 "NextGeneration Plan," NYCHA announced that it will eventually "maximize the revenue and use of ground floor spaces."³⁷ Toward that end, "NYCHA is developing a comprehensive leasing strategy for its non-residential space portfolio—to maximize the use of all available space, bring online spaces that have been taken offline, improve the ground floor experience in the developments, provide appropriate services for residents, lower the Authority's costs, and generate rental revenue. The strategy will include all commercial, community, and other non-residential ground floor spaces throughout the portfolio."

Still, the housing authority's ambitions seem too modest: its aim is to generate \$1 million annually in additional commercial-rent revenue. Specifically, NYCHA is limiting itself to encouraging retail use

merely for existing ground-floor spaces. This ignores the potential for new construction on underused (and frequently dangerous) public spaces. Such construction could make possible not only supermarkets but also a wide range of retail stores, including pharmacies—a crucial service for elderly residents with medical needs.

How much retail-rent revenue might NYCHA get from commercial establishments on its properties? In **Figure 1**, the author uses a geographic-information-system (GIS) analysis—involving an overlay of the incentive area combined with geo-coded 2014 food-establishment permits for supermarkets—to project low- and high-rent estimates for 50 NYCHA properties³⁸ that lack sufficient proximity to supermarkets, as determined by the city.

To estimate how much new retail rent that NYCHA could generate annually were it to make land available for new supermarket construction, Figure 1 displays low- (column 8) and high-rent estimates (column 7). The former accounts for the retail space required to achieve the city's target of 3 square feet of supermarket floor space per capita *exclusively* for NYCHA residents in the above 50 properties and assumes rent of \$27/sq. ft.⁴⁰ The latter accounts for the retail space required to serve the entire census-tract population in which those NYCHA properties are located and assumes rent of \$40/sq. ft.⁴¹

The low-rent estimate is \$5.9 million, and the high-rent estimate is \$19.3 million. This translates into an average of 3%–8% of current residential-rent revenue.

On some NYCHA properties, the percentage would be much higher. At the Bland Houses in Queens, for example, new commercial-rent revenue could total some 46% of that property's current residential-rent revenue. At 13 additional properties, under both the low- and high-rent estimates, new retail rent could exceed 10% of current residential rent.⁴²

VI. Conclusion

This report estimates that NYCHA could, at a minimum, realize nearly \$6 million in annual gross retail rent (at \$27/sq. ft.) from new supermarkets serving only NYCHA residents in 50 properties. If the new supermarkets served all residents in the census tracts where those 50 properties are located, NYCHA would likely realize more than \$19 million in annual gross retail rent (at \$40/sq. ft.).

Either way, NYCHA should aggressively encourage new commercial development, especially supermarkets, on its properties. Doing so would dramatically improve the quality of life of some of the poorest New Yorkers: healthier food and other shopping options would be more accessible, crime would likely decline with increased security and foot traffic, and NYCHA's finances would improve.

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SAD GROCERY STORE
26 LENOX AVE.

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So Tasty



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FIGURE 1.

50 NYCHA Properties in Underserved Community Districts

Property	1. Census- Tract Population	2. NYCHA Population	3. NYCHA Apartments	4. New Super- market sq. ft. Needed to Meet Census- Tract FRESH Target	5. New Supermar- ket sq. ft. Needed to Meet NYCHA FRESH Target	6. Estimated NYCHA Residential Rent (\$)	7. New Retail Rent @ \$40/sq. ft.—Stores Serve En- tire Census Tract (\$)	8. New Retail Rent @ \$27/sq. ft.—Stores Serve NYCHA Residents Only
Richmond Terrace	4,947	1,347	489	14,841	4,041	2,834,244	593,640	109,107
Wald	5,174	4,115	1,861	5,520	2,343	10,786,356	220,800	63,261
Farragut	4,247	3,312	1,390	12,741	9,936	8,056,440	509,640	268,272
Riis I & II	5,080	4,027	1,769	15,240	12,081	10,253,124	609,600	326,187
Smith	4,869	4,307	1,935	8,607	6,921	11,215,260	344,280	186,867
Queens- bridge South & North	6,597	6,565	3,142	19,791	19,695	18,211,032	791,640	531,765
Stapleton	5,301	3,952	693	15,903	11,856	4,016,628	636,120	320,112
Bronx River	6,200	2,977	1,246	18,600	8,931	7,221,816	744,000	241,137
New Lane Area & South Beach	3,659	1,271	699	10,977	3,813	4,051,404	439,080	102,951
Gowanus	4,495	2,798	1,139	7,485	2,394	6,601,644	299,403	64,640
Moore	7,500	1,132	463	14,500	-4,604	2,683,548	579,990	-
Astoria	4,582	3,148	1,104	13,746	9,444	6,398,784	549,840	254,988
Berry & Todd Hill	2,946	1,957	1,008	8,838	5,871	5,842,368	353,520	158,517
West Brighton I & II	1,705	1,501	634	5,115	4,503	3,674,664	204,600	121,581
East River	10,067	2,491	1,170	15,201	-7,527	6,781,320	608,047	-
Woodside	4,546	3,041	1,357	13,638	9,123	7,865,172	545,520	246,321
Armstrong I	3,786	1,070	371	11,358	3,210	2,150,316	454,320	86,670
South Jamaica I & II	8,207	2,380	1,048	24,621	7,140	6,074,208	984,840	192,780
Tompkins	3,419	2,481	1,046	10,257	7,443	6,062,616	410,280	200,961
Bailey Avenue-West 193rd Street	5,339	461	233	6,017	-8,617	1,350,468	240,680	-
Baisley Park	2,256	892	386	6,768	2,676	2,237,256	270,720	72,252
Kingsborough	3,734	2,510	1,165	5,202	1,530	6,752,340	208,080	41,310

Property	1. Census- Tract Population	2. NYCHA Population	3. NYCHA Apartments	4. New Super- market sq. ft. Needed to Meet Census- Tract FRESH Target	5. New Supermar- ket sq. ft. Needed to Meet NYCHA FRESH Target	6. Estimated NYCHA Residential Rent (\$)	7. New Retail Rent @ \$40/sq. ft.—Stores Serve En- tire Census Tract (\$)	8. New Retail Rent @ \$27/sq. ft.—Stores Serve NYCHA Residents Only
Mariner's Harbor	3,262	1,588	607	9,786	4764	3,518,172	391,440	128,628
Gravesend, Coney Island, Surfside Gardens, O'Dwyer Garden	7,462	4,876	2,341	2,386	-5,372	13,568,436	95,440	-
Albany I & II	5,281	2,985	1,229	15,843	8,955	7,123,284	633,720	241,785
Eastchester Gardens	5,991	2,086	877	17,973	6,258	5,083,092	718,920	168,966
Murphy	6,283	710	281	4,849	-11,870	1,628,676	193,960	-
Brevoort	4,763	1,969	896	8,289	-93	5,193,216	331,562	-
Marlboro	5,943	4,359	1,765	17,829	13,077	10,229,940	713,160	353,079
Cooper Park	3,100	1,578	700	3,300	-1,266	4,057,200	132,000	-
Baychester	7,289	885	441	21,867	2,655	2,556,036	874,680	71,685
Taylor Street Wythe Avenue & Independence	8,008	3,144	1,269	24,024	9,432	7,355,124	960,960	254,664
Bland	9,079	898	400	27,237	2,694	2,318,400	1,089,480	72,738
Ocean Bay Apartments (Bayside & Seaside) and Beach 41st	6,865	6,155	1,813	20,595	18,465	10,508,148	823,800	498,555
Redfern	6,456	1,655	604	19,368	4,965	3,500,784	774,720	134,055
Pink	4,384	3,724	1,500	5,152	3,172	8,694,000	206,080	85,644
Pomonok	6,427	4,254	2,071	19,281	12,762	12,003,516	771,240	344,574
Total							19,309,802	5,944,052

Note: Negative numbers in column 5 mean that the housing development already meets or exceeds the Housing Authority's FRESH minimum target (for on-site residents but not their neighbors within the Census tract) of 3 square feet of supermarket floor space per capita.

Source: Author's calculations³⁹

Endnotes

*The author thanks MI fellow Alex Armlovich and MI intern Will Palmisano for their research assistance.

- ¹ FRESH Impact Report, New York City Economic Development Corporation.
- ² "Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage," NYC.gov, 2008.
- ³ Twenty-three supermarkets have been approved under FRESH, of which six have been approved for zoning benefits and 18 for financial benefits. See "Food Retail Expansion to Support Health," NYCEDC.com.
- ⁴ "Facts About NYCHA," New York City Housing Authority, Apr. 11, 2016.
- ⁵ "NYC Full Service Grocery Store Analysis," NYC.gov, May 27, 2010.
- ⁶ Author's geographic-information-system analysis of licensed food establishments.
- ⁷ "Going to Market."
- ⁸ See Victor Bach and Tom Waters, "Strengthening New York City's Public Housing: Directions for Change," Community Service Society of New York, 2014; and "NextGeneration NYCHA," New York City Housing Authority, May 2015.
- ⁹ "Strengthening New York City's Public Housing."
- ¹⁰ "Facts about NYCHA."
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner, eds., *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies That Transformed a City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 96.
- ¹⁴ Lee Cooper, "Post-War Housing Includes No Stores," *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1994, quoted in *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ¹⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 393.
- ²⁰ See, e.g., Alex Armlovich, "Poverty and Progress in New York V: Crime Trends in Public Housing, 2006–15," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Nov. 2, 2015.
- ²¹ Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p. 395.
- ²² Oscar Newman, "Architectural Design for Crime Prevention," U.S. Department of Justice, 1973, p. 127.
- ²³ Author's interview with David Burney of the Pratt Institute School of Design.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Defined as a grocery store that sells, among others, "canned and frozen foods; fresh fruits and vegetables; and fresh and prepared meats, fish, and poultry." See "NYC Full Service Grocery Store Analysis."
- ²⁶ "Going to Market."
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ "NextGeneration NYCHA," NYC.gov, May 2015.
- ³⁰ "NextGeneration NYCHA: A Community Vision for Ingersoll Houses," NYC.gov.
- ³¹ "NextGeneration NYCHA: A Community Vision for Mill Brook Houses," NYC.gov.
- ³² "My NYCHA Developments," New York City Housing Authority.
- ³³ Author's correspondence with NYCHA.
- ³⁴ Red Apple Group did not provide financial support for this report.
- ³⁵ "Corporate Profile," Hong Kong Housing Authority.
- ³⁶ "Financial Report Archive in English," Hong Kong Housing Authority.
- ³⁷ "NextGeneration NYCHA."
- ³⁸ This report selected 50 of the 180 NYCHA properties that are eligible for FRESH incentives because such properties lacked a licensed supermarket (as of 2014) with more than 15,000 square feet of floor space situated no more than 0.35 miles away—as determined by a GIS map (available upon request).

³⁹ I created a GIS map (available upon request) using the Data.NY.Gov database of NYC retail food establishments with a square footage larger than 15,000 and holding a retail-food license. Next, I added layers for FRESH incentives and for NYCHA-owned properties, available at NYC OpenData, plus a 0.35-mile radius around each of the filtered establishments. Census tracts containing the NYCHA developments were determined by searching the address of the NYCHA development at FFIEC.gov, determining the census-tract code, and then finding the population of that tract from NYC OpenData.

⁴⁰ \$27/sq. ft. was a casual, low-end estimate provided by Red Apple CEO John Catsimatidis.

⁴¹ \$40/sq. ft. was a casual, high-end estimate provided by Red Apple CEO John Catsimatidis.

⁴² Ideally, some of these new revenues would then be spent in the NYCHA properties where they were collected, further solidifying resident support for the introduction of new stores.

Abstract

For almost a decade, New York City has used tax and zoning incentives to attract supermarkets—and with them, better access to fresh food at reasonable prices—to areas where low-income residents live. Many of these areas include public housing.

Sites for new supermarkets in neighborhood commercial districts may be difficult to assemble. The hurdles may be lower for public housing because the New York City Housing Authority owns both the buildings and the land on which they stand. More supermarkets and other retail stores on NYCHA properties could improve their residents' health, enhance public safety, and alleviate the finances of America's largest public-housing authority.

Key Findings

1. 180 of NYCHA's properties are in areas classified by the city as "underserved," that is, which have less than 3 square feet of supermarket floor space per capita. Some large public-housing properties are located more than half a mile from the nearest supermarket.
2. New commercial development, particularly supermarkets, on public-housing properties could improve access to fresh food for low-income residents. It could also bring in rental revenue for NYCHA, which faces a major maintenance backlog.
3. New retail development on the 50 NYCHA properties that are already eligible for special zoning incentives would likely yield an additional \$6 million–\$19 million in annual revenue to the city.