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# HEALTH BRIEFS

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## **PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTIONS' QUEENS NEIGHBORHOODS STREET MAPPING PROJECT** Revealing High Prevalence of Food Swamps, Vacant Lots, and Beauty Salons in Queens

### **KEY FINDINGS**

A mapping study conducted by Public Health Solutions (PHS) sheds light on health risks and health intervention opportunities in the Jackson Heights, Corona, and Jamaica neighborhoods of Queens.

- Food swamps – neighborhoods where fast food and junk food outlets outnumber healthy alternatives – were prevalent. Healthy food access was lacking in these communities, with only one supermarket for every five fast food restaurants and every six corner stores.
- Beauty salons were the single most identified site in all three neighborhoods. Engaging salons as health ambassadors may be a promising opportunity for intervention and outreach.
- Jamaica had the highest number of vacant lots, which pose both health threats and opportunities for community improvement, such as use for community gardens.

### **BACKGROUND**

PHS operates community-based health services citywide, and maintains a consistent hub of client-facing services in the borough of Queens. These include maternal and child health programs, food and nutrition services, and health benefits enrollment. PHS is committed to making Queens a healthier place for its residents. As Queens lacks a New York City Department of Health District Public Health office, there was a shortage of data about both existing and lacking services.

To better understand what additional support was needed for Queens residents, PHS devised a mapping project to geocode and categorize existing services in Jackson Heights, Corona, and Jamaica neighborhoods.

### **STUDY**

PHS' Queens Mapping Project was developed by staff across four PHS service areas, including the Maternal and Infant Community Health Collaborative, Partnership for Smoke-free NYC (now NYC Smoke-Free), the Access to Health and Food Benefits Team, and the Food and Nutrition Programs Team. Data was gathered in the summer and fall of 2014 by eight trained data collectors.

### **FINDINGS**

Data collectors recorded a total of 3,661 sites in the three Queens neighborhoods. There was a relatively even number of sites across Corona and Jackson Heights with a slightly lower number in Jamaica.

### **Food Access**

A concentration of food swamps, defined as a higher ratio of unhealthy foods compared to healthy foods, was found in all three Queens neighborhoods. Food retail establishment was the most recorded among the various categories of site types, with only one in six supermarkets for every five fast food and every six corner stores. The least common food-retail sites were those that specialized in fresh produce, including fruit and vegetable

carts and farmers' markets. This data showcased an opportunity to collaborate with corner stores and other food retail vendors to increase stock and sales of healthy foods.



**FOR EVERY SIX CORNER STORES AND FIVE FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS, THERE IS ONLY ONE SUPERMARKET**

### Personal Care

Personal care storefronts were the second most commonly identified site specifically across all neighborhoods, making up 19 percent of all sites. Beauty salons and laundromats were both among the top six most commonly identified sites across all categories. Prevalent in these three neighborhoods, beauty salons offer an opportunity for public health intervention. Studies conducted nationwide showcase barber shops and beauty salons as neighborhood centers that can easily be repurposed to also provide relevant health information and resources to customers.



### Vacant Lots

Jamaica had a higher number of vacant lots compared with the other two neighborhoods. Vacant lots are a significant economic problem that may affect the health and safety of residents. The presence of vacant lots in a neighborhood has been associated with higher levels of crime and illegal activity, such as sex work, drug sales, and drug use. On the other hand, vacant lots can potentially be used for neighborhood betterment when repurposed for positive benefits, such as community gardens. Community gardens can offer physical and mental health benefits for community members. They can also provide opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity, support decreased street violence, and improve social well-being through strengthened social connections.

**JAMAICA HAS THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF VACANT LOTS OF ALL THREE NEIGHBORHOODS**



### CONCLUSION

PHS recognizes that making places healthier requires capacity for planning, delivering, and evaluating public health prevention efforts. This project helped further the understanding of how the places we live, work, learn, and play impact health. This study served as an important step in developing a strategic plan to address the unique barriers each neighborhood faces to better promote health and prevent disease. It was our goal to be able to use this information not only to inform programmatic and policy work, but also to share with PHS' partners as we continue to work towards addressing the health needs of our program participants. In addition, other health organizations may use these tools and common terminology to conduct similar place-based assessments and document citywide trends in public health.

### Recommendations & Interventions

1. Focus on working with corner stores to increase stock and sales of healthy foods.
2. Recognize beauty salons as potential venues for distributing health information and stylists as public health advocates.
3. Collaborate with Jamaica's community organizers and advocates to identify opportunities to transform vacant lots into viable spaces for community engagement and health.

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**Public Health Solutions (PHS)** is the largest public health nonprofit serving New York City. For over 60 years, PHS has improved health outcomes and helped families thrive by providing services directly to the city's most vulnerable populations, publishing groundbreaking research that moves public health policy and practice forward, and supporting over 200 community-based organizations through our long-standing government partnerships. For more information, visit [healthsolutions.org](http://healthsolutions.org).