

Links to digital work:

- Final Project to Foundations of Computing in Fall 2025 semester with Jonathan Soma, a data visualization of game sales on Steam ○ <https://haiyib.github.io/steam-games/>
- Boston Marathon post-race party at City Hall Plaza ○ Published by BU News Service, I collaborated with Wanheng Jiang to cover a post-race party at City Hall Plaza for 128th Boston Marathon.
 - <https://bunewsservice.com/watch-boston-marathon-post-race-party-at-city-hallplaza/>

Writing samples:

1.

When House members travel the globe on private dime, families often go too

By PHILIP RANDAZZO, HAIYI BI, AKANKSHA GOYAL / Boston University, the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland, Boston University and the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland
Updated 9:00 AM EST, September 23, 2024

They are the U.S. House’s frequent fliers — representatives who have traveled the country and the world on official business paid for by private interest groups. Over the past decade, they have accepted nearly \$4.3 million for airfare, lodging, meals and other travel expenses. Almost one-third of those payments — just over \$1.4 million — covered the costs for a lawmaker’s relative to join the trip.

From European enclaves such as Rome, Geneva and Copenhagen to oceanfront golf resorts on both American coasts, to Asia and Africa, the trips allow members and their families to stay in world-class resorts, spend days soaking up the culture and score reservations at the hottest restaurants in town.

Critics maintain the trips — paid for by nearly 200 advocacy organizations, nonprofits, and liberal and conservative think tanks — are no more than “influence-peddling vacations.” Since 2012, hundreds of House members, closely split along party lines, and their staff, have taken at least 17,000 privately funded trips, congressional records show.

But a five-month investigation by Boston University and the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland reveals how dozens of lawmakers legally turn the trips into free family adventures. The investigation examined 628 privately sponsored trips taken by lawmakers who topped the list of “frequent fliers” in the House in the past decade.

U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-California, leads the list of frequent fliers with 45 trips since 2012. Lee has brought her grandson, spouse, sister, two daughters-in-law and two children on trips to Beijing, Berlin, two locales in Africa, as well as Istanbul, Israel and other destinations — with the family always flying business class and staying in five-star accommodations.

Lee declined interview requests. In an email, her spokesperson wrote, in part: “Congresswoman Lee has been in complete compliance with Ethics guidelines when traveling on privately funded official trips. As the Ranking Member of the House Appropriations subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, these trips provide her an important opportunity to engage on foreign policy matters that inform her committee work and her work on behalf of her district and constituents. “As one of the few Black lawmakers in these influential positions on foreign policy, she takes very seriously every opportunity she can to improve her understanding of global peace and security policy. Her legislative record speaks to that.”

The 24 House members who travel most frequently on the private sponsor dime took either their spouse, grandchild, sister, daughter-in-law or child with them on nearly 44% of their trips, congressional records show. House ethics rules permit funders to pay for one relative to join a trip.

“It seems like an egregious abuse,” said [Beth A. Rosenson](#), a political science professor at the University of Florida and author of a [2009 congressional private travel study](#).

Allowing sponsors to pay for relatives to travel, Rosenson said, undercuts the sweeping 2007 House ethics reforms intended to distance lawmakers from special interest influence on trips, and insert more transparency into the process.

Some interest groups include lobbyists on their boards or accept money from foreign governments. When they pay the relatives’ trip costs, it heightens risks that lawmakers will feel indebted to those paying the big bills, Rosenson said.

“The member is not going to forget that the group paid for them and their spouse to go to Copenhagen, which I think is a huge problem,” Rosenson said. “It goes against the professed intent of the law, which is to reduce the influence that special interest groups have on members.” The reforms, prompted by a 2006 scandal ensnaring public officials who took extravagant free trips from prominent Washington, D.C., lobbyist Jack Abramoff, resulted in stricter limits on lobbyists’ roles in private trips. For House leaders to approve trips, details on who pays, who goes, all expected costs and an hour-by-hour daily itinerary must be disclosed in advance.

Members must participate in a full day of official programming per day on trips, and are generally expected to personally pay for recreational activities and entertainment not considered “official programming” under House travel rules.

House leaders have approved dozens of trip itineraries clearly listing recreational and entertainment activities. Trip disclosure records rarely indicate whether the sponsor or lawmaker pays for the leisure activities. The itineraries show that, in addition to the trip’s official purpose — such as a conference, policy summit or meeting with business or government leaders — opportunities for travelers include fishing, golfing, sightseeing, shopping, riverboat cruises,

ceramic painting, museum and art gallery visits, hip-hop concerts, sunrise yoga and even an afternoon ballgame at Yankee Stadium.

Trip records also show the members' relatives are rarely, if ever, part of official programs. That contrasts with federal executive branch [spousal travel regulations](#), which require spouses to participate in formal events for funding to be approved.

House rules allow the travel, in part, so lawmakers can experience firsthand the challenges facing areas of the U.S. and the world, and enable Congress to better legislate, invest in, regulate and devise foreign policy for those regions.

Few of the 628 trips the frequent House travelers took were to impoverished regions or global trouble-spots, records show.

“These trips are not to problematic areas like Afghanistan or Iraq but usually to some sort of wonderful vacation spot like Paris or Brussels,” said congressional ethics expert [Craig Holman](#) of the nonprofit watchdog group Public Citizen. “It is little more than a vacation designed to endear the member of Congress to whoever is paying for the trip.”

Some of the House members traveling frequently take a relative on nearly every trip, even local ones to Virginia or Maryland, trip records show.

Sponsors spent nearly \$100,000 for Washington Democrat Rick Larsen's wife, Tiia Karlén, to accompany him on 19 of his 24 trips since 2012, including \$12,607.76 for a 2022 excursion to Madrid, trip records show.

In an emailed statement, Larsen wrote, in part: “Private nonprofit groups regularly invite members on approved trips. I am no exception to those invites. If the work is relevant to my district, my committee, or an issue where I am developing an expertise and time permits, I consider going. Then, if, and only if, the House Ethics Committee approves the travel consistent with the House Rules, will I participate in the trip.”

U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn, a Colorado Republican, took his wife Jeanne Lamborn on nearly every privately funded trip he took between 2012 and 2023. Sponsors ranging from The Heritage Foundation to The Aspen Institute to The German Marshall Fund of the United States underwrote almost \$90,000 in costs for Jeanne Lamborn for 15 separate trips she took with her husband. The couple traveled the globe, staying in posh hotels and resorts in London, Vancouver, Jerusalem, Berlin, Prague, Nairobi, Buenos Aires and Reykjavik, as well as locales in the U.S., the records show.

A spokesperson for Lamborn did not respond to two emails and a call to his Washington office seeking comment.

In February 2020, a private car took Lee and her [new](#) husband, the Rev. [Dr. Clyde Oden Jr.](#), from the airport to luxe German resort [Schloss Elmau](#), a historic icon nestled in the Bavarian Alps.

With Lee attending a [five-day forum](#) on U.S.-German relations, Oden could enjoy the amenities of a hotel listed by Condé Nast as one of the best in the world. Oden's trip tab: over \$12,000, records show.

Illinois Democrat Jan Schakowsky brought her lobbyist husband, [Robert Creamer](#), on 22 trips, staying in luxury hotels in London, Prague, Istanbul and São Paulo, among other destinations. Private sponsors, most frequently Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit The Aspen Institute, paid nearly \$135,000 for Creamer's travel since 2012, records show.

Schakowsky described the "educational" trips as "no walk in the park."

"We are often working 12-hour days speaking at roundtable discussions, meeting with dignitaries and scholars and examining local policies," she said in a statement.

An array of private organizations has underwritten nearly \$136,000 for California Democrat Ami Bera to bring his wife to Copenhagen, Tokyo, Switzerland, Iceland and the opulent [Cloister resort on private Sea Island, Georgia](#), among other places, trip records show.

Bera did not respond to multiple calls or emails to his office seeking comment.

Of the 21 privately funded trips former GOP Rep. Fred Upton of Michigan took over the past decade, he brought his wife Amey Upton on all but one. Upton retired from Congress in 2023. His most frequent sponsors were The Aspen Institute or The Ripon Society, the records show. Amey Upton's travel cost private sponsors over \$113,000. She and her husband stayed in worldclass hotels and resorts in London, Paris, Copenhagen, Geneva, Rome and Istanbul, among other global cities. The sponsors also paid for the Uptons' to travel numerous times to Sea Island, Georgia, where they stayed in the luxurious waterfront five-star resort, The Cloister, set on a private island, the records show.

Messages left on cellphones listed for the Uptons seeking comment were not returned. In dozens of instances, the cost of one relative exceeds \$10,000 or more per trip, funding that critics claim lawmakers should report as taxable income. House rules lack any guidance requiring the disclosure to the IRS of family travel costs as income, a glaring ethical omission, according to critics.

Congress updated the U.S. tax code in 1993, mandating money provided to an individual for a spouse or dependent travel costs on a business trip must be reported as income unless the relative is an employee or had a legitimate business reason to be on the trip. An IRS spokesperson did not respond to calls, emails or text messages requesting comment.

It's not only House members who can bring family on trips. Their staff can as well.

Since 2012, [some of the most frequent staff travelers on both sides of the aisle](#) have taken their spouses on dozens of trips to resorts and spas, courtesy of private sponsors such as the Congressional Institute. According to travel disclosure forms filed by staff members, the nonprofit — which takes pride in its [“premium level”](#) programming, provides [“valuable educational and organizational tools”](#) for managing a congressional office. It also provides the spouses of these staffers the chance to stay at world-class resorts such as The Greenbrier in West Virginia. While congressional staffers are attending lectures, spouses can try their hand at falconry or yoga classes, enjoy spa treatments or play golf.

An analysis of dozens of staffers who traveled most frequently in the last decade shows private sponsors spent more than \$12,000 so spouses could accompany staffers on these educational trips.

While staffers tend to keep their privately sponsored travel domestic, their bosses can be found traveling around the globe. The most frequent international destinations for House members and relatives are Israel, luxury resorts in Kenya and other regions of Africa, and Germany. U.S. popular travel spots include Virginia’s horse country, San Diego and Santa Monica, California, and annual jaunts hosted by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation to historic Tunica, Mississippi, home to casinos, golf courses and rich Southern hospitality, records show.

Boston University and the Howard Center did not examine travel records for the much smaller Senate, which reported more than 2,600 trips during the same period. The Senate disclosure forms do not provide sponsors or destinations in a format that can be readily analyzed.

In addition to travel disclosures, nonprofit tax records and lobbying registrations, the examination by the Howard Center and Boston University also used data collected by OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan government watchdog organization, and by LegiStorm, a public affairs information platform.

In nearly 90 trips in which relatives traveled, legislators added extra days to their travel. While members are required under House rules to cover some of those costs personally, it is still a bargain for lawmakers, as private funders almost always cover round-trip airfare to the trips’ original destination for members and relatives, trip records show.

Colorado Democrat Diana DeGette leads frequent-flier House members in adding time to official trips, sometimes by up to five additional days. On seven of the trips, one family member joined her — either her husband, [Lino S. Lipinsky](#) de Orlov, a Colorado judge, or two different children, with stops in Belgium, Prague, Istanbul, Japan and a [beachfront Ritz Carlton Hotel in Florida](#), trip records show.

Numerous travel invitations include a lawmaker’s spouse by name, another ethical red flag, critics said.

“Dear Diana: I would like to invite you and Lino to participate in a congressional conference on U.S. Russia Relations: Policy Challenges in a New Era,” reads one invitation to DeGette, from the nonprofit organization The Aspen Institute Inc. Congressional Program, a top funder of House trips since 2012. The Jan. 25, 2017, letter adds: “Expenses for you and Lino, including business class airfare” will be covered.

Such direct solicitations to members of Congress impart a basic “lack of ethical hygiene,” said Dylan Hedtler-Gaudette, senior government affairs manager for the Project on Government Oversight.

Degette did not respond to requests for comment.

In response to questions about whether it was appropriate to include a lawmaker’s spouse on a trip invitation, a spokesperson for The Aspen Institute said in an email: “Congressional Ethics rules are clear that members may be accompanied by a spouse. As the invitation in the document you attached indicates, we take compliance seriously and our programming is aligned with the spirit and the letter of those rules.

“For more than four decades, the Congressional Program has encouraged constructive interaction between members, and we have found that the presence of spouses certainly contributes to better relationships among them. Our programming is funded by foundations and 501c, free of special interests and lobbying. We’re proud of the role the Congressional Program has played in strengthening bipartisan cooperation and providing a space for members to delve into complex and pressing public policy issues.”

It is unclear if any House members report the family travel costs as income.

When asked about this and other travel guidelines for members and staffers, Tom Rust, the chief counsel and staff director for the House Ethics Committee, declined to comment.

The IRS ignored a 2006 [complaint](#) Holman filed requesting a probe into whether lawmakers broke federal law by failing to report relatives’ costs as income. He said it has never occurred.

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The Howard Center at the University of Maryland is funded by a grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation in honor of newspaper pioneer Roy W. Howard.

2.

Free condoms are not accessible anymore for LGBTQ+ groups in Jackson Heights, and they are waiting for a response from the city

By Haiyi Bi



On the wall of Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo's office, there is a heart-shaped decoration made by condoms in rainbow colors, representing the color of LGBTQ+. Photo by Haiyi Bi

For the past two years, the city’s free condom program has struggled to meet demand, leaving neighborhoods like Jackson Heights with limited supplies, especially for transgender residents and sex workers who rely on them.

New York City’s Health Department introduced the NYC Condom Availability Program on Valentine’s day of 2007, and has been serving the city with individual and organizational uses for about 20 years. For individuals, supplies are available across the city in locations like community food pantry, health clinic, or pharmacy.

In Manhattan, residents have the opportunity to request sexual supplies in sites on the “[NYC Health Map](#)” that the department provided. The Cathedral community cares for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine is one of the pick-up locations, where a person can ask for either condom or lubricant while getting their food supply, with a valid government-issued ID.

While the government made sure to include the five boroughs in the program, there is still a difference between each borough’s site distribution. According to NYC Condom Availability’s list of active venues which updates on a daily basis, Manhattan, for instance, has in total 230 locations to be ranked at the first place. This number is approximately a double compared to the 105 sites that Queens has.

Condom Distribution Sites in New York City, by Borough

The NYC Condom Availability Program distributes free sexual health supplies to residents across all five boroughs, yet Manhattan has approximately twice as many distribution sites as Queens.

Manhattan

230

Brooklyn

221

Bronx

139

Queens

105

Staten Island

3

Chart: Haiyi Bi • Source: Department of Health and Mental Hygiene • Created with Datawrapper

At the same time, Queens’ population is far more than Manhattan. 2023 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey estimates that about 2.25 million residents live in Queens, while Manhattan remains about 1.6 million. With fewer sites serving a larger population, the shortfall hits hardest in immigrant and LGBTQ neighborhoods like Jackson Heights.

“The problem for the New York City department is terrible,” said Liaam Winslet, CEO and cofounder of Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo, a non-profit organization working for transgender, Latinx and sex worker community in Jackson Heights.

December 1 is the annual World AIDS Day. The NYC Department of Health holds an event to commemorate the LGBT Center in West Village. Yet, Winslet said the department “is not interested” in speaking about issues related to the condoms.

“It is difficult for sex workers right now to receive condoms, they will say that, ‘I don’t have money to pay for condoms, but I probably have a sex practice, use condoms’. Why does New York City have a condo for the trans community and the sex worker and the LGBT community in New York City?” Winslet said.

The organization now provides condoms to transgender sex workers on their own budget, which is about \$1,000 for 300 members who regularly seek help from them.

“They used to give me a huge package every time I asked for condoms and give it to my girls. Now they are asking me, you should give us something? But I’d tell them, It’s not me. I don’t have any more. They don’t give us any,” said Andrea Mosulini. She is a volunteer at the organization, also a transgender sex worker in the neighborhood.

“We try to get with other organizations with friends, but as far as I know, the government is not really caring about us right now, so I’m really worried, because condoms are what protect us and prevent us from getting sick,” Mosulini said. “I have friends that have chlamydia, gonorrhea, which is very easy to get from someone, if you don’t take the correct ways to prevent it.”



A little box of condoms is available in Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo's office.

On a recent weekday afternoon, the hallway outside Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo's small Jackson Heights office filled up quickly. Trans women and other sex workers pick up food bags, hormone referrals and condoms on the office table. Winslet said usually 80-85 members show up from Wednesday to Saturday every week, either getting supplies like hot meals, or reading the HIV testing. Every Wednesday, medical staff from the local hospitals support the members and bring them the HIV testing.

For many of them, the office is one of the few places where they can ask for condoms without being turned away. Several of the distribution sites listed on the NYC Health Map require a government-issued ID, which is hard for people like Mosulini who does not have an ID to get help from.



Educational flyers distributed in front of Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo's office.

Mosulini said that when she renewed her state ID, officials sent it back with the wrong gender marker and her old photo. On paper, she still appears as a man, despite her feminine name. She tried to fix the mistake, but after a year of calls and forms, she still has no valid ID and is afraid that going back to the DMV will only produce another incorrect card.

"I need my ID," she said. "And it feels like they do it on purpose."

The lack of documents touches nearly every part of her life, not just health care or condoms. "It's Christmas and I wanted to send money to my family, but I can't because I don't have an ID," Mosulini said. "If I want to go to any club, they won't let me in either."

The struggle over condoms and IDs in Jackson Heights, Mosulini said, is only one small part of a much larger fight over whose lives are considered worth protecting.

"We all know that this person, [Trump], doesn't like us as a community," she said. "He's attacked us openly, with no shame, calling us monsters and perverts. He's taking things away from our community and from education, and education is so important for people to understand us. There are so many things being taken away."

"What I keep coming back to is how this situation pushes us down. As LGBTQ community, we really do need condoms if we're not going to get sick. And if we do, it only puts more pressure

on the health system. Sometimes it feels like they don't mind that, like they almost need people to be sick to keep the hospitals running. That's the only explanation I can find," she said.

3.

2025 Oscars nominations: Will "Emilia Pérez" beat "Wicked" again?

February 11, 2025

by BU News Service

Elphaba, played by Cynthia Erivo and Glinda played by Ariana Grande from the 2024 film Wicked. Photo Courtesy of Universal Pictures/AP News.

By Haiyi Bi

Boston University News Service

Hollywood recently revealed this year's Oscars nominations with "Emilia Pérez," "A Complete Unknown" and "Conclave" leading in total nods. The awards will recognize the most outstanding and influential films released in the past year across 23 categories, including best picture, best actress and best actor.

This year, 10 films will compete for Best Picture. Historically the number of nominations has been a sliding range from five to 10, but since 2022, the nominations have expanded to 10.

Within the nominees is "Anora," a comedy-drama film by Sean Baker, who won the Palme d'Or at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival; "Dune: Part Two," which has blockbuster appeal and critical acclaim, while "The Brutalist" and "A Complete Unknown" have prestige dramas written all over them. "Emilia Pérez" was a major hit at Cannes too, winning the Jury Prize.

The Academy's Board of Governors has expanded theatrical eligibility requirements in this category. To qualify for an Oscar, a film must have a one-week release in select United States cities and, for Best Picture, expand to 10 of the top 50 U.S. markets within 45 days, with up to two international. Additionally, late releases must submit a plan and expand by Jan. 24, 2025.

Although "Inside Out 2" created a buzz in the past summer of 2024, moviegoers on Reddit have predicted that either "Wild Robot" or "Flow" will win for Best Animated Feature.

With "Emilia Pérez" winning Best Motion Picture for a Musical at the Golden Globes, many have turned to social media to express complaints on whether the musical should have won over "Wicked."

X user @philiphonathn post regarding Emilia Pérez and Wicked discussion. Screenshot taken of <https://x.com/philipjonathn/status/1882429114143134143>.

Criticisms on “Emilia Pérez” were questioning the content and topic of the film. “If ‘Emilia Pérez’ wins Best Picture over ‘Wicked’, I will be forced to stop taking the Academy seriously,” @philipjonathn posted on X.

In the past year, “Wicked” was extremely popular among the younger generation in the country. “Emilia Pérez,” however, did not generate as much buzz until the unexpected win at the Golden Globes. “Wicked” received a 7.7 out of 10 rating from IMDb audience score, while “Emilia Pérez” got a 5.7 score.

“Emilia Pérez” and “Wicked” are both nominated for the Best Picture, as well as having nominees for Best Actress between Cynthia Erivo and Karla Sofía Gascó and Best Supporting Actress between Ariana Grande and Zoe Saldña. Erivo and Grande played Elphaba and Glinda in “Wicked,” whereas Gascó and Saldña played Emilia and Rita in “Emilia Pérez.” This means that each film has nominees in both the Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress categories, making them key contenders in the awards race.

According to Screen rant, the biggest discussion centered around whether Demi Moore could leverage her victory to secure her first Oscar, after winning Best Actress at the Golden Globes for her performance in “The Substance.” Screen rant commented that Moore “earned plenty of accolades for her performance.” Her counterpart actress, Margaret Qualley, was not nominated for Best Supporting Actress. Movie web said it is “some of the most infuriating entertainment news in 2025.”

Meanwhile, popular actor Timothée Chalamet received a Best Actor nomination for his performance in “A Complete Unknown.” Chalamet’s first nomination for this category was his role as Elio Perlman in “Call Me by Your Name,” for the 90th Oscars in 2017.

The ceremony is set for March 2 at 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time at the Dolby Theatre in Ovation Hollywood and will be broadcast live on ABC and streamed on Hulu.

[Click here](#) for the full list of nominations for the 2025 Oscars.

4.

Comparing between Queens and Manhattan, Meadowmere appears to be an underestimated overweight community

By Haiyi Bi



A Stop & Shop market in the area, in which residents buy groceries at an affordable price.

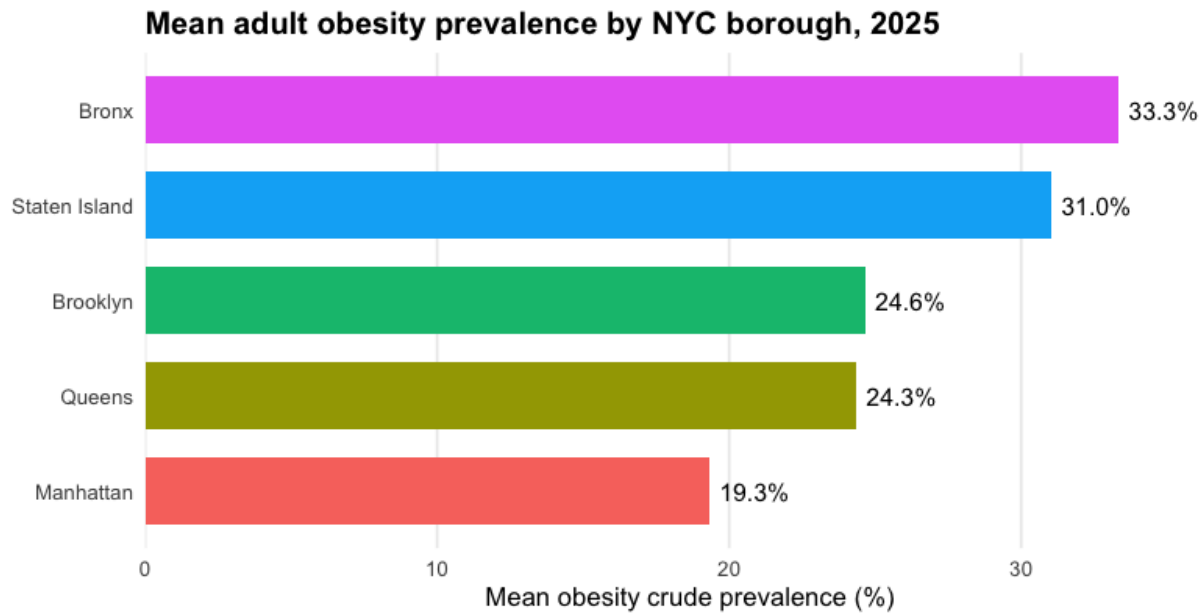
It was a Wednesday afternoon where people in Meadowmere, Queens are driving to their nearest Stop & Shop to stock up their household supplies. According to the U.S. Census data, the average number of people in one household in this small neighborhood is 4.4 persons per house, which means they must feed the whole family.

Sabria is one of them. Working in Brooklyn but living in the area, she was doing her routine grocery shopping, and had potatoes, greens, and some snacks in her hands at the store. But feeding a family of that size comes with a choice — and in Meadowmere, that choice is often limited.

“The healthy food I see here is mostly Western Indian food, which is about 75% of the food options here,” she said. “I’ve lived in a couple of different areas, but there’s a lot of fast-food chains here, like Chick-Fil-A.”

“They are processed food and you know, more things here in America are a lot more processed, so, trying to pick stuff that's not as processed is tough,” she commented.

Every shop's parking lot in this plaza called "5 Towns" is filled with cars, and the drivers appear to fit the U.S. census data that the median age is 32.5, with a large population of African Americans and Latin-Americans. What's worth noting is that the adult obesity rate in this area is 32.8%, far exceeding the average number in Queens.





Street view of the “5 Towns” sign and cars driving by a main highway in the town.

An analysis of 5,197 census tracts across New York State, drawing on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and the CDC's PLACES dataset — found that demographic and economic factors explain 57% of the variation in adult obesity rates across the state. Poverty emerged as the strongest predictor, while higher income was consistently associated with lower obesity rates.

Yet, Meadowmere was predicted to have a 15.4% obesity rate from a regression study, the actual rate rose by about 7.4%. It is a gap that demographic variables alone cannot account for.

Driving and limited food accessibility became the biggest two reasons for that overweight rate to be significantly higher than other neighborhoods. Professor Anthony Ferrante, the co-founder of Columbia University's New York Nutrition Obesity Research Center explained this.

“Social settings to be lean or to be heavy — those pressures will fall on top of access to food, and then there's the food itself,” he said. “If your only options were calorie-dense foods that lacked flavor, the common perception is that weight gain would be less significant compared to having access to high-calorie meals that actually tasted good.”



“Give and Go Cupcakes” available at the price of \$4.99, from the local Stop & Shop.

Just a few miles away, in the Far Rockaway area, the predicted and actual obesity rate is only 0.1% difference. Far Rockaway and Meadowmere share similar demographic, income levels, but there are more sidewalks and stores around.

Edward, a Lowe’s employee at the 5 Towns plaza who commutes over an hour from Jackson Heights every day, noticed the fact that getting healthy food is hard here, by the moment he started working here.

“Compared to Manhattan, people walk a lot there, but people drive a lot here — and maybe that's a reason for food accessibility here,” he said, holding a \$8.99 salad from Stop & Shop.

“It's cheaper to get a cheeseburger than this, this is like \$8.99, and a chicken sandwich is like \$4.99. So it's just more accessible,” Edward said.

He tries to make healthier choices on purpose. His doctor recently flagged high cholesterol and elevated blood sugar, prompting him to cut back on soda and processed food. But he acknowledges that not everyone around him makes the same call. “A quarter of my colleagues are kind of overweight, and they're the ones that go to Chick-fil-A,” he said.

Edward also pointed to the area's unusual geography as a factor. Sitting near the JFK Airport and bordering Nassau County, the neighborhood feels cut off. "This town is a little bit isolated from other towns. The fact that it's near the airport may add to the accessibility issue."

The data points to structural conditions, but experts urge caution in drawing straight lines between any single factor and obesity. "The amount of fat that you have is the sum of many factors over your entire life and it is remarkably complex," said Professor Ferrante.