

# Fast food marketing for children disproportionately targets certain communities

31 October 2014, by Iiti Agnihotri



In the United States, fast food is the second-largest source of total energy in the diets of children and adolescents. Credit: freeimages.com

(Medical Xpress)—A newly published research study examining only marketing directed at children on the interior and exterior of fast food restaurants has found that the majority of black, middle-income and rural communities are disproportionately exposed to such marketing tactics.

Authored by Arizona State University researcher Punam Ohri-Vachaspati and her colleagues, the study is the first to examine the use of child-directed marketing on the interior and exterior of [fast food](#) restaurants and its relationship to demographics. It adds to a substantial body of literature on the effects of various marketing efforts on fast food consumption and their relationship to health outcomes in children.

In the United States, fast food is the second largest source of total energy in the diets of children and adolescents. It provides 13 percent of total calories

consumed by 2- to 18-year-olds. Every day, almost a third of children aged 2 to 11 years and more than 40 percent of 12- to 19-year-olds consume food and drinks from fast food restaurants.

"Fast food companies in the U.S. spend nearly a quarter of their marketing budgets targeting youth aged 2 to 17 years," said Ohri-Vachaspati. "In 2009, fast food restaurants spent more than \$700 million to [market](#) their products to children and adolescents; nearly half of the amount went toward premiums such as kids' meal toys."

The study considered a total of 6,716 fast food restaurants – chain and independently owned – between 2010 and 2012. The businesses were selected from a national sample of 434 communities where public middle and high school students reside. Community-specific data were obtained at the block group level and included information regarding median household income, ethnicity and degree of urbanization.

Elements of child-directed marketing were broken down into discrete measures. Marketing tactics on the interior included indoor play area and display of kids' meal toys. Child-directed marketing measures on the exterior of the restaurants visible from the parking lot or street included advertisements with cartoon characters; advertisements with movie, TV or sports figures; and advertisements for kids' meal toys among others.

The researchers found that while most fast food restaurants sampled were located in non-Hispanic and majority white neighborhoods, those situated in middle-income neighborhoods, rural communities and majority black neighborhoods had higher odds of using child-directed marketing tactics.

Overall, one-fifth of restaurants sampled used one

or more strategies targeting children. The indoor display of kids' meal toys was most popular, followed by exterior ads with cartoon characters, as well as ads with kids' meal toys. Chain restaurants had nine times greater odds of having a kids' meal toy display on the inside; restaurants in majority black neighborhoods had almost twice the odds of having such displays compared to those in white neighborhoods.

Provided by Arizona State University

"Marketing food to children is of great concern not only because it affects their current consumption patterns, but also because it may affect their taste and preferences," said Ohri-Vachaspati, who studies the role that food marketing plays in driving behaviors and assesses the impact of food environments and policies in schools and in community settings. "We know that consumption of fast food in children may lead to obesity or poorer health, and that low income and minority children eat fast food more often."

According to Ohri-Vachaspati, while several major U.S. food and beverage companies and [fast food restaurants](#) have created the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative and taken other steps to encourage marketing of healthier food and beverage choices to children, there's room for improvement.

"Despite the self-regulatory efforts, a stronger push for providing and marketing only healthy foods to children is needed, especially in disadvantaged populations," she said. "We know that fast food is convenient and inexpensive and is often used by parents to provide quick meals to their children. We want to make it easier for parents and children, especially those at greater risk for poor diet and health, to make healthier choices by marketing only healthy food options that meet dietary guidelines to children.

"Another goal of the study is to track patterns. As marketing strategies targeting [children](#) in media are restricted as part of self-regulation, an increase in such efforts may or may not occur at restaurants. We'd like to present evidence to inform future industry and public policy initiatives."

APA citation: Fast food marketing for children disproportionately targets certain communities (2014, October 31) retrieved 26 June 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-fast-food-children-disproportionately.html>

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