THE CHALLENGES TO HEALTHY EATING CREATED BY CLAShING INFLUENCES IN A CHILD’S FOOD ENVIRONMENT

PUBLIC HEALTH OUTCOMES AND INTERVENTION RESEARCH PROGRAM (COHIBS)/EASES RESEARCH INSTITUTE

ABSTRACT

Children’s food environments are influenced by the availability of fast food restaurants, schools, grocery stores, and convenience stores, and families have been called upon to change their food purchasing and eating behaviors to be healthier. Communities can face formidable challenges to accessing healthy foods due to limited income and access to grocery stores that offer the variety and quality of foods available in wealthier communities. Respondents acknowledged that eating fast foods is not healthy, but the convenience and accessibility of such foods make them difficult to avoid.

METHODS

The study, funded by the Saban Research Institute, is a mixed-methods approach that focuses on understanding how families incorporate healthy and unhealthy choices into their daily lives. Qualitative research is being conducted through in-depth interviews of community residents, community leaders, parents of school-aged children, and students. Qualitative methods include in-person interviews, focus groups, and observations. Quantitative methods include surveys of community residents and parents of school-aged children. The study is being conducted by the Community Health Outcomes & Interventions Research Program (COHIBS). The study is being guided and informed by a Community Advisory Board (CAB) that includes local community leaders and representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services.

RESULTS

FOOD CHOICES

Community residents, parents of school-aged children, and students were asked to describe their food environments. Families were asked if they felt they had access to healthy foods and if they made healthy food choices. Students were asked about their food preferences and limitations. Results indicated that families were making healthy food choices while making unhealthy choices, both for themselves and their children.

FAMILIES

Families reported that their children eat Chinese, Mexican, and American foods, which included the consumption of fast foods. Families reported that they made healthy food choices and unhealthy food choices for their children.

SCHOOLS

Schools were asked about their food environment, including the availability of healthy and unhealthy foods. Schools reported that they offered healthy options, including salads, but that their students often chose unhealthy options. Students reported that they preferred unhealthy options, including fast foods, over healthy options.

COMMUNITY STORES

Community stores were asked about their food environment, including the availability of healthy and unhealthy foods. Community stores reported that they offered healthy options, including fresh produce, but that their customers often chose unhealthy options.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Residents from these communities face formidable challenges to accessing healthy foods due to limited income and access to grocery stores that offer the variety and quality of foods available in wealthier communities. Respondents acknowledged that eating fast foods is not healthy, but the convenience, cost, and accessibility of such foods make them difficult to avoid.

Families are making healthy food choices while making unhealthy food choices, both for themselves and their children. Schools are offering healthy options, but their students often choose unhealthy options. Community stores are offering healthy options, but their customers often choose unhealthy options.


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