THE CHALLENGES TO HEALTHY EATING CREATED BY **CLASHING INFLUENCES IN A CHILD'S FOOD ENVIRONMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Background. A child's food environment, including fast food restaurants, schools, street food vendors, and families have been identified as playing influential roles in children's eating behaviors and as potentially contributing to their risk for obesity. Identifying how these entities interact with one another to support or counter children's healthy eating behaviors is critical. In Los Angeles over 40% of children in the county are either obese or at-risk of becoming obese, with East and South Los Angeles having the highest rates of child obesity. Methods. This qualitative study presents findings from 110 semi-structured interviews conducted with residents and key leaders in East and South LA recruited through referrals from key informants and community leaders. Interviews addressed the socio-cultural contexts of food and physical activity, barriers to healthy eating, access to healthy food choices, and informational gaps related to obesity. **Results.** Data reveal that considerable tension exists between parents attempt to integrate healthy food choices into their children's diet and the exposure to unhealthy food sources in school and the community. Parents report making earnest attempts to include fruits and vegetables in their children's diets, such as including vegetables in soup, serving diced fruit, making smoothies, allowing children to choose the vegetables they want to eat at a meal, and offering salad before the main meal. Parents acknowledge that schools are trying to offer healthier menu items, but still perceive schools as a barrier to healthy eating. Parents state that schools have limited fruit and vegetable options and serve unappetizing, highly processed foods that encourage children to buy unhealthy foods from street vendors, fast food venues or convenience stores close by. Some immigrant Latino parents reported that their children lose weight during school vacations when they have more control of the child's food choices. Participants acknowledged that eating fast food was not healthy, but the convenience and accessibility of such foods make it difficult to avoid. **Conclusion.** Interventions should build upon efforts families are making to integrate healthy food into children's diets and work with schools to create menus that work to support familial efforts.

METHODS

- 110 semi-structured interviews conducted with 44 community residents (CR) and 66 key informants (KI) in East and South LA
- KI and CR recruited through referrals from key informants and community leaders.
- Verbal consent obtained for KI and CR • 1.5 to 2 hour individual interviews conducted in-person
- KI and CR received incentives in compensation for their participation, KI received \$50 and CR \$35
- All interviews audio-taped and transcribed for analysis using QSR-N6 software

Domains for interviews with Key Informants and Community Residents

- Formal and informal health-related and other communication
- o Perceived community strengths and key resources
- o Identification of "trusted" resources, individuals, information sources & providers Perceptions of issues related to obesity, overweight and diabetes in the targeted communities, including barriers to healthy food choices and physical activity
- Perceptions, knowledge and use of health services
- o Decision making related to food purchased and consumed by families
- o Knowledge of the relationship between overweight, obesity and diabetes
- o Challenges faced related to food security, physical activity and healthy lifestyles o Suggestions of strategies to overcome these challenge

COMMUNITY PROFILES

	90059 - S. Los Angeles	90022 - E. Los Angeles
Population	38,123 people	68,688 people
Ethnicity	African American - 46% Latino - 53%	Latino - 96%, majority are of Mexican descent
Families living below poverty line	39% (compared to 9% for US)	25% (compared to 9% for US)
Median household income	\$22,151	\$27,471
Education	44% of those over 25 yrs old have a high school education	36% of those over 25 yrs old have a high school education

* Source: US Census, 2000, www.census.gov.

RESULTS

FOOD CHOICES

In East and South Los Angeles, the food environment influencing children's food preferences draws from a broad landscape of food choices, including family meals, fast food venues, school food and food available from street vendors and local convenience stores. Frequently, these key players reinforce unhealthy food choices by offering the same or similar foods in their respective venues (e.g. schools will serve pizza for breakfast or lunch, food vendors will sell hot dogs or other high calorie foods, parents will buy fast food as a treat for children). At other times, parents struggle to integrate healthy foods and healthy food habits such as vegetables, fruits, well-rounded meals, efforts that often collide with other influences of a child's food environment.

FAMILIES

Most parents interviewed for this study were aware of the threat of overweight and the importance of nutritious eating for children. They shared their often creative strategies to incorporate healthy food, especially vegetables, into their children's' diets and the develop mental, social, structural and cultural challenges to ensuring that they maintain a healthy weight and a nutritious diet.



As children get older, they eat fewer vegetables

Before we used to eat a lot of vegetables. It wasn't such a problem to get them to eat cauliflower. I would make salsa from tomatoes and onions with their rice and they would eat it. I would also add squash with cheese...but now they don't like it. ELA

I rarely cook because my kids, they don't eat the food that I cook up. You know, like okra and cabbage and, you know, good foods, they just will not eat it. SLA

Parents report utilizing various strategies to get their children to eat fruits and vegetables like modeling, adding vegetables to soups, hiding vegetables in food, cutting up fruit in at a meal, and forcing them eat salad before the main meal.

Soup most of all, or chicken breast is what she [daughter] likes best, not fried, but sautéed or boiled, salads, and fruits. She loves this. But my son hardly eats fruits, only when he sees me eating a banana or grapes, a mango....SLA

Bananas, grapes, it's always the soft stuff...Sometimes I'll buy apples. But they sit and go bad, oranges too. Now, my kids are spoiled. So, I would have to cut the oranges good, so I cut the oranges and put them in a big bowl... then they would eat it. But as far as just sitting the oranges on the counter they won't touch them. SLA

I used to have problems with my daughter, because she did not like to eat vegetables. I told her that if she didn't start eating vegetables, she would loose her teeth. Now she eats broccoli, even raw. SLA

I wait 'till everybody comes home. Ask everybody what they want. Write it down and we'll agree to which one I'm going to cook. And, they always have to have broccoli or cauliflower with their dinner. Or spinach... and I tell them you can have either one, which one you want, they say we want all of them, so I do all of them. SLA

They didn't like spinach and we recently been putting it in the food. She'll put tomatoes and onions in it, and then she'll put the spinach in it, and you know when it cooks it'll shrink and it kind of looks like cilantro, and nobody says anything so they're like eating it. ELA

small pieces, using scare tactics, allowing children to choose the vegetable they want to eat

Other parents stick to what they know their children will eat in order to get them to eat any vegetables.

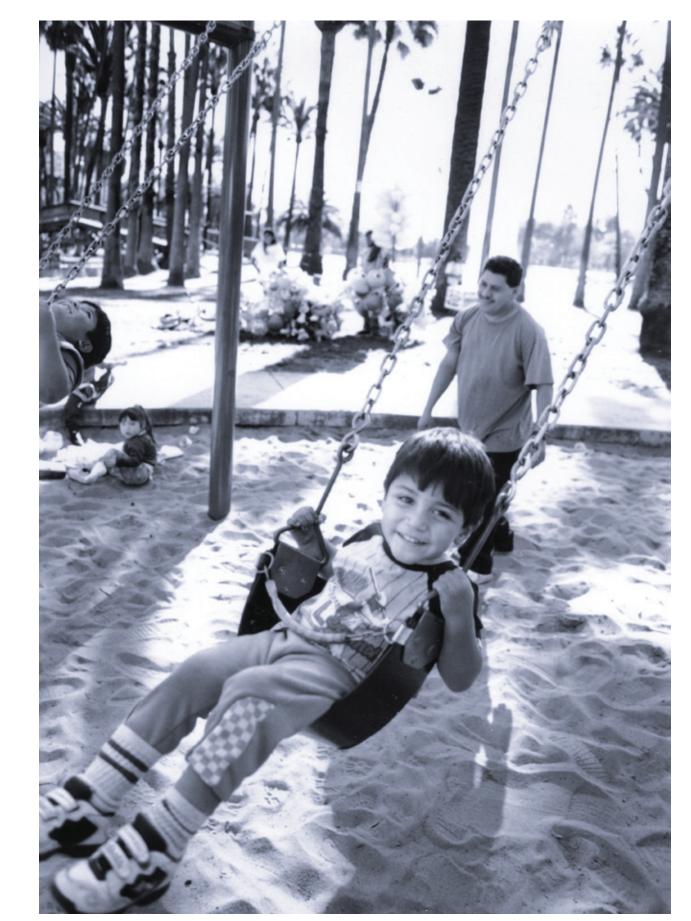
Basically my kids are green beans or corn, that's them, plus I give them some broccoli, I make some collard greens. Other than that, they ain't playing around with no mustards, not turnips, not nobody else, it's like, ugh, what's all that? SLA

Some parents say that their children eat throughout the day and employ different strategies to minimize access to unhealthy snacks.

The problem with kids is that they eat all day. We can't have cookies in the house because they'll devour them. ELA

Baby carrots my mom buys a bag for each person 'cause they'll munch on them like chips...that's what they eat like snacks, that and celery sticks and peanut butter, they love that. ELA

Many parents noted that chips, especially Flamin' Hot Cheetos, are a wildly popular, highly caloric and available snack and at times are given to children to appease them.



Some time after the baby was born my wife began feeding him Hot Cheetos and other similar foods, but the doctor told us we had to stop, because the baby was gaining weight...A lot of people eat Hot Cheetos, they're on the bus eat Cheetos and drinking soda in order to keep their children calm. SLA

Many parents acknowledged that food choices and preparation are rooted in their own cultural experience and upbringing and these foods of choice or their preparation may or may not be

of papas [potatoes], and the big thing of sopa [soup]. ELA

I am Salvadoreña. In my culture we eat pupusas and they're filled with fat and lots of flour, and the Mexicans have their enchiladas, taquitos, All these foods are

filled with fat. We are not eating like we're supposed to, but we always eat what we know, our culture, we don't know what to give our kids...I'm always on the lookout for new recipes so I can change...if I continue feeding my daughters what I was taught to cook, they will get even more plump that what they are. SLA

Parents are not willing to buy foods that their children will not eat.

I've tried that reduced milk and we don't like it. My son won't drink it. My husband won't drink it. I won't drink it. So, I say why waste money, because if we don't like what we buy, we're going to throw it away. SLA

SCHOOLS

Ninety five percent (95) of the school-age children in these communities are eligible for and rely on the free or reduced school breakfast/lunch program. As much as some parents try to encourage their children to eat fruits and vegetables, many see their efforts thwarted by schools that offer unhealthy, fatty, poor quality meals such as hamburgers and pizzas. Some parents believe that exposure to these foods can negatively influence children's food habits, not wanting to eat what parents prepare for them at home, especially if meals include vegetables.

When I'm going to give them something to eat, I remind them it needs to be healthy, like a lot of fruits and vegetables, and supplements...nowadays kids go to school and eat school food. But then, they don't want to eat the food at home, they want different kinds of foods. As a Mexican woman, I am accustomed to giving them vegetables. ELA

Parents of school-aged children report that they often don't know if and what their kids eat. At times, schools do not serve what is listed on the cafeteria menu. Schools are so large that students often do not get to the lunch line in time to purchase the tastier or healthier food.

...sometimes I ask her, did you eat what's here on the school menu? She says, mom they didn't serve us that today, they served us hamburgers...Or she'll say, I didn't get there on time, my teacher held us back in class. Or she'll say they didn't cook the food well, it was raw and I didn't eat it, because it's gross. I don't know when she eats honestly, because if you are not at the school physically you just don't know if your kids are eating. SLA



You know what I see the main problem here with the young kids is school lunch. They're not doing a good job providing, they're supposed to be healthy lunches but they're not, they're greasy, they're not tasteful, so they don't eat. The food is not good. So for lunch you see pizza and it's swimming in oil, I think they're promoting more junk food. ELA

One parent noticed that her children actually lose weight when they are on vacation and increase weight when they go back to school.

... I don't know if it's because he eats more, but when he's on vacation he loses weight. He doesn't eat lunches and he's eating fruit at home, but when he's in school he gains weight. ELA

In spite of schools' efforts to limit unhealthy food in cafeterias or student stores and prohibit children from bringing certain foods to school, unhealthy foods are available before or after school from local small stores and street vendors. Some schools attempt to prohibit street vendors from selling items on or near school grounds, especially vendors who sell unhealthy foods.

Well, we tried to chase them out of the perimeter of the school but I can see that we have a problem with a little store that is right across from the back of our school. Children go there and they just buy soda pops, and candy and chips, so even if we stop them from buying we don't sell those things in here or we don't let them bring them from home. Still, after school, they buy them. SLA

When they come out of school, they come home eating Doritos, or corn on the cob, that they buy on the street. ELA

FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS

Respondents acknowledged that eating fast foods is not healthy, but the convenience, cost and accessibility of such foods make them difficult to avoid.

I think [healthy food] is easily available, but it's not convenient. And it's so convenient to buy some really poor quality food. You go to McDonalds get a happy meal, you feed your kid with 2 bucks, 3 bucks, and your kid is fed. I think a lot of times that's just their concern, that the kid has food in their stomach...to prepare a healthy meal it might take a little longer. They do not have the time. Both parents are working. ELA

Healthy food choices in fast food venues are more expensive.

I guess McDonalds already added salads into their menu, and then Jack 'n the Box has some really good salads and stuff like that too. But, I noticed that...sometimes the salads are more expensive than the burgers, and people tend to lean more to that way than the salads...this community right here, a lot of people are low income, and if maybe people could afford things better, they would do it. ELA

The media sends the message that fast foods are alluring which set the stage for conflict if parents try to offer healthy foods to their children.

But you know, they put in their head, the media and everything so the kid is crying for the McNuggets. The parents want him to shut-up, right? They need to keep the kid quiet because they're stressed out too. ELA

A Key Informant identified Starbucks as a new fast food venue of choice and noted that youth are more inclined to spend considerably more money on food from these more expensive venues than buying items from grocery stores.

I'm shocked, but there are...kids are at Starbucks spending 3-5 dollars, that just blows my mind...you talk about values, that's what we teach our children today, that it's okay for a teenager to spend 5 dollars a day on coffee and a cup cake... I'm amazed, and what you see people buy; the candy, the cookies, and they will go to the store nearest them instead of going to a big supermarket to get cheaper prices. SLA

SUPERMARKETS

Most parent respondents reported that they typically go to several grocery stores in order to look for the best deals (quality of food, price, variety, and quantity). Price, quality and accessibility were key factors in determining which foods are purchased and where they shop.

Unlike wealthier communities, there are few supermarkets located in both targeted communities. Many respondents claimed that well known, quality supermarkets do not regard investment in their communities as profitable.



That's one of the problems they face, that corporations and franchises don't see the buying power that the Latino community in East LA. So, with supermarkets more than likely it's the same thing. They don't see the buying power that the Latino community in East LA has, because it's largely Latino. ELA

It makes me feel like they don't care, because of where we are at. Because they feel like this is what we're supposed to get, or it don't matter who gets this because ain't nobody really complaining about it. SLA

While most community residents in South LA reported shopping at the two local supermarkets, many seek markets outside the area that they regarded as offering higher quality

In the Hispanic area, Superior Lynwood is better than Superior right here off of Avalon. In I had to shop at Food 4 Less I would go down off of Imperial and Crenshaw...Yeah, it's a lot better. It's better service. The stores better kept as far as the neatness and stuff. SLA

Food 4 Less is better on prices, but Ralph's, Albertsons and all that over there it's better on quality....I go to the area because there's a whole different group of people over there than over here. Over here, you're going to the fruit section, you go to the fruit, vegetable section, and it's too warm. So, you got bugs flying around, fruit looking not to good, vegetables looking not too good. On the east side of town... it's all different. SLA

Many respondents rely on small groceries in their communities as a supplement to food purchased from larger store. Some complained that small markets cannot be trusted to sell quality foods.

In some places [small markets] you can't trust that what they sell is well maintained. SLA

Residents in both communities reported that they are trying to change their diets but cannot easily access healthy food staples such as brown rice or wheat tortillas in local grocery

A lot of people ask me where can I get brown rice? I don't know where I can get brown rice. I can't find it, and it's true, sometimes you can't find it. ELA

STREET VENDORS

Street food vendors are a highly visible formal economy on the streets of East and South LA. Their presence is ubiquitous Most are operated by Latino immigrants and much of the fare they provide offers a hybrid of American fast food and snacks and food that caters to the Mexican or Central American palate. Street vendors can be a source of easily accessible food options, many of which are quite healthy such as fruit and corn on the cob. Others are not.

They have the hot dogs with the bacon, and then they also have the fruits but they make it appealing to you, they know that Mexicans eat everything with lemon, so the mangos now they have lemon and chile. ELA

It's definitely part of what LA is. If there were no vendors it would be like a day without a Mexican. ELA

I think they're as important as the ice cream vendors from the cart as important as the ice cream truck that comes the neighborhood, it's part of the every day life. ELA

The easy availability, low cost, and good taste of foods sold by street vendors make it easy to avoid cooking meals.

If a tamale person is coming by hollering, "Tamales" every morning, you know you can get a tamale every morning. What's the purpose of you getting up and cooking? They're only a dollar. SLA

Well they are cheap, a couple of tacos, they're more economical, and like they say, it's a tradition they are bringing from their countries, traditions and customs. SLA

While most respondents acknowledge that street vendors who are primarily new immigrants from Mexico or Central America are hard working, many expressed concern about questionable hygiene, not paying taxes and, in South LA, competing with African American vendors











ChildrensHospitalLosAng International Leader in Pediatr

I've seen the police or health department take them off of the street and just dump all their stuff and I feel bad for them because all they're trying to do is make a living, but their way of making a living can make you really sick...you don't know if the bacon and that was refrigerated even before they cooked it, sometimes they'll just have it lying there and it gets bacteria. ELA

You go to any restaurant, any place that prepares food. They got to have an A...I don't see it out on the side of them little carts they be pushing when they selling their tamales. So I don't know what I'm eating... I don't do the tamales. I don't even buy the corn. But my kids, they like it. SLA



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Residents from these communities face formidable challenges to accessing healthy food choices due to limited income and access to grocery stores that offer the variety and quality of foods available in wealthier communities.
- Food preparation and choice is often driven by cultural heritage, which can be fundamentally healthy, or conflict with what is regarded as balanced nutrition.
- Nearly all respondents were well aware of the need to integrate more healthy food choices into their children's diet.
- Parents report making concerted, often creative, efforts to weave healthy food, especially vegetables, into their children's daily meals.
- School-aged children in these communities are exposed to a food environment outside the family that can influence their food expectations, taste and eating patterns.
- While some elements of a child's food environment schools, fast food venues, local convenience stores and street vendor -- may support healthy food choices, e.g., fruit from street vendors, salads at school, most do not. They can create significant challenges to families who try in earnest to limit their children's intake of fat, salt and calories.
- Efforts to prevent childhood overweight and obesity should build upon families existing food purchasing, preparation and eating patterns that are healthy.
- Prevention efforts cannot be effective without addressing the elements in a child's food environment, e.g., school meals, sources of high calorie/high fat food outside the home that create obstacles to developing children's ability to make healthy food choices.
- Prevention efforts must consider the socioeconomic and cultural context of food choices, preparation and eating patterns. Community residents and leaders, including youth, should be engaged in the development and implementation of intervention efforts if they are to fully understand these contexts and succeed in defining community and developmentally appropriate prevention strategies.