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Fast food foraging: The impact of neighborhood, household and cultural factors on dietary decision-making and BMI in South Los Angeles

Previous research has linked neighborhood characteristics and obesity trends. In particular, lack of access to affordable, healthy food is seen as contributing to poor dietary habits and low levels of physical activity. At the household level, food choices are often shaped by time constraints where working families use fast food to cope with low pay and long, inflexible work schedules, and as a strategy to reduce work-family conflict and minimize time and energy expenditures. For individuals, food preferences are related to cultural values such as eating traditional foods or consuming low calorie foods to maintain body weight. Thus, decisions about food are shaped by issues of access, time, and culture at both the macro- and individual-level. To better understand food choice decisions, we seek to expand applications of foraging theory to inner city food environments. In doing so, we will evaluate the impact of neighborhood-level (i.e. access to fast food versus full-service grocery stores), household-level (i.e. temporal and energy constraints on food procurement and meal preparation) and individual-level factors (i.e. cultural food values and preferences) on food choice in South Los Angeles County. In support of this model we present results from our previous research indicating that (1) maternal time budgets and access to fresh versus prepared foods impact children's dietary intake and BMI; and (2) children are very likely to model their cultural values and preferences on those of their parents.