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Prevention Research Center
on Nutrition and Physical Activity

Where and Why are Youth Eating Fast Food?



Youth Task Force

Harvard Prevention Research Center

Who We Are

- We are a diverse group of eleven young adults from various areas of Boston.
- We were recruited from the Health Careers Academy in the Fenway area and the Colonel Daniel Marr Boys & Girls Club in Dorchester.
- We meet once a month from October until May.



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How Our Project Came About

- With all the media focused on the issue of fast food and youth we felt like more information had to be gathered.
- We wanted to know:
 - Why were youth deciding to eat at certain restaurants?
 - Where were the available restaurants in relation to selected high-schools ?

So we chose:

- To survey high school students about fast food environments around our schools
- To create a visual map showing the locations of fast food restaurants near fourteen Boston Public High Schools



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Our Survey

- We came up with four research questions:
 - Is price a factor when deciding where to go for food?
 - Is price a factor for choosing a healthier meal?
 - How often does one eat fast food?
 - What are young people's opinions on regulating healthy foods in schools?
- Our next step was to create a practice survey to test if the questions were understandable.
- Revised the survey based on our test.
- Conducted the survey from Feb-Mar, 2004.



Our Sample

- N=90
 - High school students and some college students in Boston (Health Careers Academy is on Northeastern University's campus)
 - Sample selected from students eating at fast food restaurants near where YTF members go to school, Fenway, Longwood, Roxbury, Charlestown, Dorchester



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Our Sample (cont.)

YTF members categorized popular fast food restaurants to ask young people some questions

- Pizza places (Papa Gino's)
- Coffee places (Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks)
- Burger (McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's)
- Chicken (KFC)
- Healthy (Subway, Au Bon Pain, The Wrap)



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Methods

- We went to fast food restaurants near where we attend school either during lunch or after school (Health Careers is an open campus, there is no cafeteria, they eat at local restaurants)
- We approached students at the tables once it appeared they were almost finished eating
- We were each responsible for collecting data from 10 students.



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Results

- Question 1: Is price a factor in deciding where you go for food?
 - 74% felt that price determined where they ate.



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Results (cont.)

- Question 2: If yes, if prices were equal for a meal would you choose a restaurant with predominately healthy foods like “The Wrap” or restaurants with predominately unhealthy foods like “McDonalds”?

Of the 63 students that answered yes to Q1:

- 51% said that they would choose a healthy place (i.e. The Wrap), if prices were equal
- 49% said that they would not choose a healthy place, if prices were equal



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Results (cont.)

- Question 3: In a typical week how many meals do you eat at fast food restaurants?
 - Approximately 50% of our sample eats 1-3 meals per week at fast food restaurants
 - 31% eat 4-6 meals per week at a fast food restaurant



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Results (cont.)

- Question 4: Some of our state officials would like to regulate the sugary/high fat foods that are placed in vending machines, a la carte lines and the school lunch so that the school nutrition environment is healthier. Do you agree with this?
 - 10% strongly agreed
 - 39% agreed
 - 38% disagreed
 - 13% strongly disagreed



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Results (cont.)

- We also counted the number of tables at a given restaurant and the number of salads ordered.
- Salad Statement: Student interviewers found that more salads were purchased at Au Bon Pain than at Burger King, McDonald's and at food courts.



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The Map

- We plotted addresses from the internet on the locations of popular fast food restaurants and the 14 Boston Public High Schools.
- Each category is identified by a specific color.



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What Have We Learned So Far?

- There are too many fast food restaurants near our high schools.
- Youth do go to fast food restaurants during the weekdays, for their lunch and after school.
- Cheaper fast food restaurants have more youth customers than more expensive, healthy restaurants
- Instead of spending money on new fast food places, plans should be focused on building more cheap, healthy options for youth



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