

Understanding Grocery Purchasing in a Low-income Urban Environment

February 2013
Qualitative Health Research

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Grocery Shopping on a Shoestring

Parents with low incomes and who rely on SNAP (food stamps) to buy groceries know the difference between “healthy” food and “unhealthy” food. Studies show that they prefer healthy food for their families. So why do they purchase unhealthy foods for their families?

One of the biggest challenges to feeding a family on a tight budget is that nutrient-rich foods such as fruit, vegetables, lean meats, and low-fat dairy products are more expensive than foods high in fats, sodium, and carbohydrates. Another challenge is that fresh food is more expensive than processed, boxed, and canned food. Also, shoppers make decisions about which foods are the most filling. Some nutrient-rich foods are less filling than high-calorie and high-sodium food—so the unhealthy food choices win out.

Supermarkets tend to promote unhealthy foods over healthy food. By offering sales and special offers for processed food sold in bulk, shoppers are directed toward unhealthy food purchases.

Key Findings

- Low-income shoppers want to buy fresh, nutritious food for their families, but this desire is challenged by small grocery budgets.
- Providing “enough food for the family” was the first priority among low-income shoppers.
- Sale items promoted by the supermarkets were usually high in fats, sodium, carbohydrates, or a combination.

Public Health Concerns

- Foods that are high in fats, sodium, and carbohydrates increase risk of obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease in communities already challenged by these conditions.
- The supermarket environment influences food purchasing decisions among low-income shoppers trying to stretch their food dollars.
- Low-income shoppers who use SNAP funds to buy food are influenced by the dual challenges of tight budgets and supermarket environments to buy food that they know is unhealthy.

Who We Are

Based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an academic center that conducts and promotes research and communicates information about the complex inter-relationships among food production, diet, environment and human health.



Study Summary

Researchers interviewed primarily low-income customers who shop at a Southwest Baltimore supermarket to understand what factors into shoppers’ decisions when grocery shopping for their families. Research was conducted via in-depth interviews and focus groups, with a total of 46 participants.

The participants were all women responsible for feeding children under age 15, and most receive benefits from SNAP and/or WIC. They ranged in age from 20 to 70, and all meet the criteria for “low-income” (below 185 percent of the poverty line).

Strategies for Action

- Customers can lobby local supermarkets to promote healthier food choices.
- Customers can make suggestions to local supermarkets about how to improve the supermarket environment.
- Supermarkets can promote healthier food choices, through sales on nutritious foods, through better labeling of healthy foods, and through more mindful product placement.

Abstract:

qhr.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/02/26/1049732313479451.abstract