

Child-Directed Marketing Within and Around Fast-Food Restaurants

This brief provides an overview of child-directed marketing within and around fast-food restaurants and examines how these marketing practices vary by neighborhood income and race and ethnicity.

Using validated instruments, trained staff gathered data from 2,176 fast-food restaurants located in a nationally representative sample of public middle- and high-school enrollment areas in 2010. For these analyses, child-directed marketing was defined as the presence of one or more of the following: exterior advertisements with cartoon characters; exterior advertisements with movie, television, or sports figures; exterior advertisements for kids' meal toys; 3-D cartoon characters on the exterior; exterior play area; interior play area; in-store displays of kids' meal toys; and other child-directed marketing, such as advertisements for children's birthday parties.

Introduction

Consumption of fast food has increased over the past few decades and is associated with poor health outcomes, including increased risk of obesity.¹ Fast food is the second-largest source of calories among youths ages 2 to 18, accounting for 13 percent of their total caloric intake.²

Many children eat fast food often: in 2007–08, 33 percent of 2- to 11-year-olds and 41 percent of 12- to 19-year-olds consumed food or beverages from a fast-food restaurant on a given day.³ Children who eat fast food have a higher intake of calories, total fat, saturated fat, sodium, sugar, and sugar-sweetened beverages than those who do not eat fast food.⁴ Children who eat fast food also are less likely to meet dietary recommendations for fruits, vegetables, and dairy.⁵

The fast-food industry spends \$660 million to market its products to children and adolescents each year and spends the most on toys for kids' meals—\$360 million for the cost of toys alone.⁶ These efforts help fast-food restaurants sell more than 1.2 billion kids' meals annually, and those sales account for 20 percent of all foods and beverages sold for consumption by children.⁶ This has serious health implications. Research overwhelmingly shows that the vast majority of fast-food kids' meals do not align with national dietary recommendations^{7,8} and that early exposure to marketing practices instills brand recognition and shapes future consumption patterns.^{9,10}

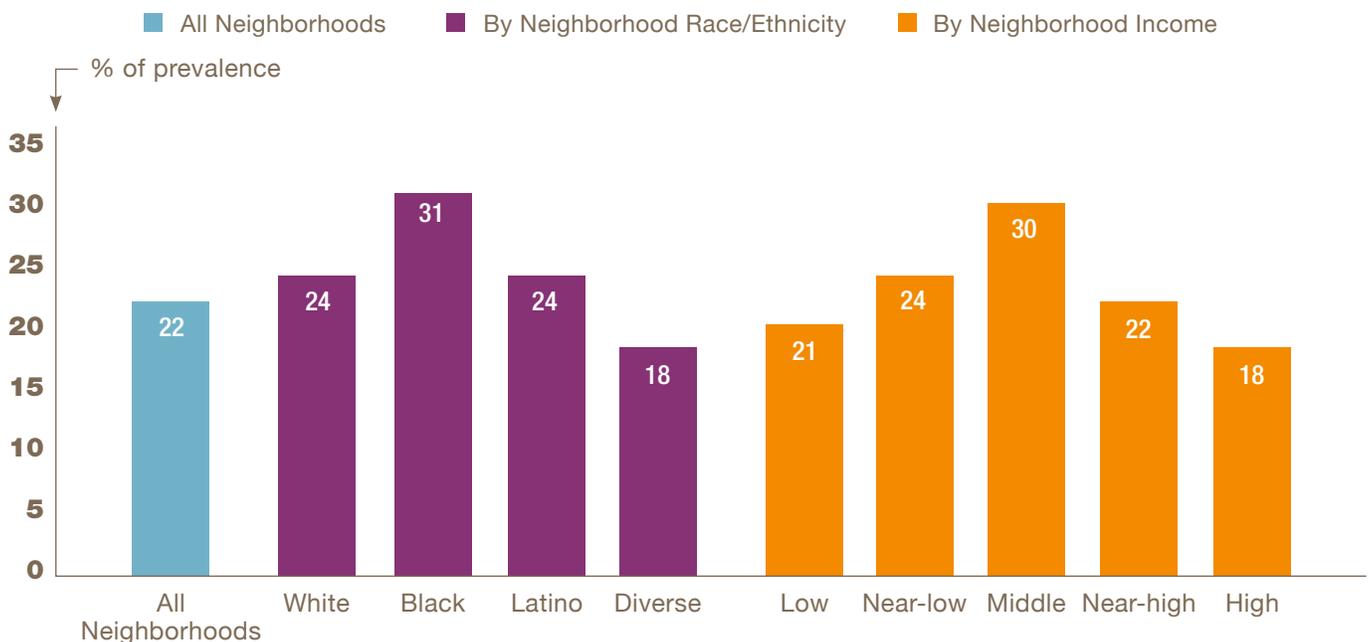
In response to concerns about excessive marketing of unhealthy products to youths,¹¹ 16 major food and beverage companies are members of the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), which was launched in 2006.¹² Companies that participate in this voluntary initiative agree to limit child-directed marketing to healthier foods and beverages. Only two fast-food companies, McDonald’s and Burger King, are part of the CFBAI. These two companies pledged to advertise only products that meet company-established nutrition criteria to children under age 12 and began implementing their CFBAI pledges in 2007. Both McDonald’s and Burger King recently updated their pledges to include new [uniform nutrition criteria](#), which were developed by CFBAI for participating companies.¹²

Despite efforts by the food and beverage industry to self-regulate, independent research shows that the vast majority

of child-directed marketing is for high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods;^{7,13,14} that fast-food companies have increased child-directed marketing;^{14,15} and that fast-food companies target young people living in lower-income communities and communities of color.^{16–18} However, child-directed marketing practices within and around fast-food restaurants have not been examined.

Given the prevalence of fast-food consumption among youths and the serious health implications, evaluating child-directed marketing is critical. This brief summarizes the extent and scope of child-directed marketing within and around fast-food restaurants that are located in communities surrounding public middle and high schools. It also assesses how these marketing practices vary by neighborhood income and race and ethnicity.

FIGURE 1 Prevalence of Child-Directed Marketing Within and Around Fast-Food Restaurants by Neighborhood Characteristics



The following comparisons are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$: majority Black vs. diverse and high-income vs. middle-income.

Key Findings

More than one-fifth (22%) of all fast-food restaurants use child-directed marketing within and around the building to promote their offerings to children. These practices are most prevalent in majority Black neighborhoods and middle-income neighborhoods (Figure 1).

- Fast-food restaurants are significantly more likely to use child-directed marketing in majority Black neighborhoods (31%) than in racially diverse neighborhoods (18%).
- Child-directed marketing is significantly more prevalent among fast-food restaurants in middle-income neighborhoods (30%) compared with those in the highest income neighborhoods (18%).

Compared with all fast-food restaurants, those that offer kids' meals use child-directed marketing strategies more often than those that do not offer kids' meals (Table 1).

- Chain fast-food restaurants (75%), including CFBAI members, are significantly more likely to offer kids' meals than non-chain restaurants (34%). Both chains that participate in CFBAI—McDonald's and Burger King—offer kids' meals.

- Irrespective of their chain status, fast-food restaurants that offer kids' meals use child-directed marketing strategies much more often compared with those that do not offer kids' meals.

The most prevalent child-directed marketing strategy used by fast-food restaurants is an indoor display for kids' meals toys (Figure 2).

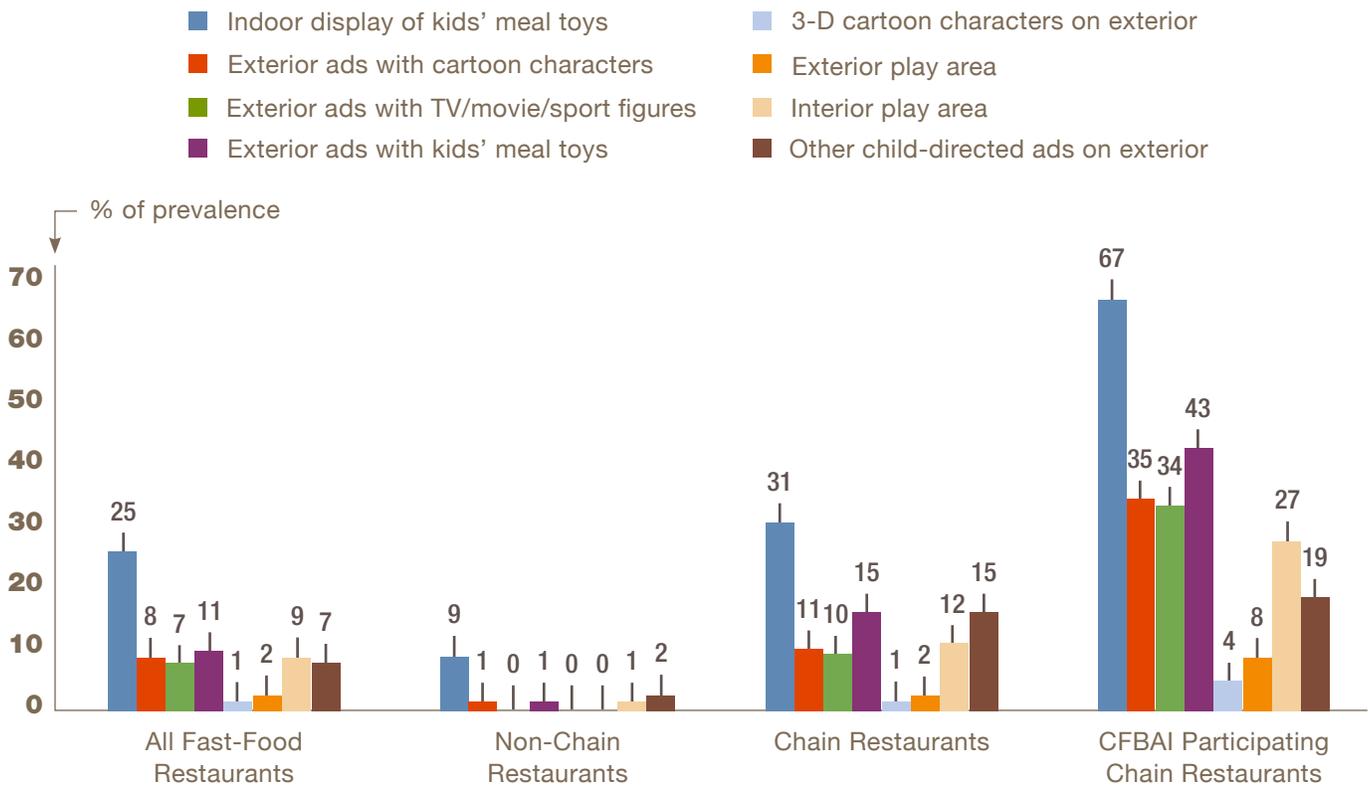
- Twenty-five percent of all fast-food restaurants that offer kids' meals have an indoor display for kids' meals toys.
- Chain restaurants offering kids' meals are more likely to display kids' meals toys inside the restaurant (31%) than non-chain restaurants that offer kids' meals (9%).
- The prevalence is even higher among the two CFBAI fast-food chains—67 percent of McDonald's and Burger King's restaurants display kids' meals toys inside. These chains also have higher prevalence of all types of child-directed marketing strategies within and around restaurants than any other fast-food restaurant that offers kids' meals.

TABLE 1 Percentage of Fast-Food Restaurants that Offer Kids' Meals and Use Child-Directed Marketing Within and Around their Buildings

Chain Status	Fast-Food Restaurants Offering Kids' Meals	Use of Child-Directed Marketing Within and Around Fast-Food Restaurants	
		Offering Kids' Meals	Not Offering Kids' Meals
All Fast-Food Restaurants	56%	38%	2%
Non-Chain Restaurants	34%	13%	1%
Chain Restaurants	75%	47%	5%
CFBAI Participating Chain Restaurants	100%	91%	^

^ McDonald's and Burger King are the only two fast-food chains that participate in the CFBAI and all of their restaurants offer kids' meals.

FIGURE 2 Prevalence of Various Child-Directed Marketing Strategies Used Within and Around Fast-Food Restaurants that Serve Kids' Meals, By Chain Status



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Child-directed marketing within and around fast-food restaurants, especially those located in majority Black communities, which are disproportionately affected by obesity, is a serious concern. The poor nutritional quality of kids' meals and the very limited selection of healthy options in such meals is well-documented.^{4,5,7} A report from the Rudd Center rated kids' meals offered by McDonald's and Burger King, which are the only two fast-food companies that participate in the CFBAI, as worse than meals from other fast-food restaurants in terms of meeting established nutritional criteria.⁷

Every McDonald's and Burger King restaurant in this analysis offered kids' meals, and more than 90 percent engaged in child-directed marketing within and outside of their buildings. However, according to a report published by CFBAI,¹⁹

both restaurant chains are meeting their CFBAI pledges. McDonald's also has provided leadership in other instances, such as launching a menu labeling initiative before a pending federal rule that will require large restaurant chains to post calorie information on their menus and menu boards.

Given that fast-food restaurants sell 1.2 billion kids' meals each year and their child-directed marketing focuses heavily on toys that accompany these meals, advocacy efforts to change such marketing practices could have a significant impact on children's diets and health. For example, advocates have proposed that state and local governments take action, including setting nutrition standards for meals that accompany toys.²⁰⁻²² Efforts to limit the distribution of kids' meals toys in conjunction with foods and beverages that do not meet nutritional criteria have proved feasible.²³ However, the restaurant and advertising industries strongly oppose such efforts.^{24,25}

The Institute of Medicine report *Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention*²⁶ reiterates the urgent need for the food, beverage, restaurant, and media industries to market only those foods that support a diet aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to children and adolescents ages 2 to 17. Comprehensive and consistent nutritional guidelines are needed to ensure that only healthy foods are marketed to youths. Those proposed by the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children,²⁷ which would limit children's exposure to products high in unhealthy fats, added sugars, and sodium and also would encourage food groups that make a meaningful contribution to a healthy diet, could serve as a model for stronger guidelines.

In 2012, both Burger King and McDonald's updated their CFBAI pledges to follow new uniform nutrition criteria, but the criteria are weaker than those proposed by the Interagency Work Group. Burger King agreed to expand its pledge to some in-restaurant promotions, but McDonald's restated pledge does not include in-restaurant promotion strategies.⁸ Encouraging more fast-food restaurants to join the CFBAI, strengthening CFBAI's uniform nutrition criteria, and expanding the current CFBAI agreements to consistently include child-directed marketing within and around fast-food restaurants, as well as at point of sale, also would help to limit children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising.

Study Overview

The findings in this brief are based on data from the Bridging the Gap Community Obesity Measures Project (BTG-COMP), an ongoing, large-scale effort conducted by the Bridging the Gap research team. BTG-COMP identifies local policy and environmental factors that are likely to be important determinants of healthy eating, physical activity, and obesity among children and adolescents. BTG-COMP collects, analyzes, and shares data about local policies and environmental characteristics relevant to fast-food restaurants, food stores, parks, physical activity facilities, school grounds, and street segments in a nationally representative sample of communities where public school students live.

This study is based on data from 2,176 fast-food restaurants located in a nationally representative sample of public middle and high school enrollment areas. Data were collected during the spring and summer of 2010 from 154 communities across the United States. Results are presented separately for all fast-food restaurants and for those that offer kids' meals. Fast-food restaurants are categorized into chain and non-chain restaurants (based on *Restaurants & Institutions* magazine's listing),²⁸ and those that are part of the CFBAI. For this study, communities around schools were classified into four mutually exclusive and exhaustive subgroups according to the proportion of White, Black, and Latino population. Each community was classified as one of the following: majority White ($\geq 66\%$ White residents), majority Black ($\geq 50\%$ Black residents), majority Latino ($\geq 50\%$ Latino residents), or diverse (no clear majority of White, Black, or Latino residents). Communities also were classified by income quintiles into five categories: low income, near-low income, middle income, near-high income, and high income.

Suggested Citation

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www.bridgingthegapresearch.org

About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. The program identifies and tracks information at the state, community and school levels; measures change over time; and shares findings that will help advance effective solutions for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic and preventing young people from smoking. Bridging the Gap is a joint project of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Health Research and Policy and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org

Endnotes

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