

Reaching Adolescents through Food Stores: An Environmental Intervention Program to Improve Diet and Nutrition in East Baltimore

The primary aim of the study was to conduct formative research that would lead to the development of intervention components for the Baltimore Healthy Stores program that will focus on adolescents, and that will be feasible (acceptable, operational, sustainable) to corner store owners/managers. Secondary aims included: to describe the food use patterns of adolescent residents of Baltimore City, to understand how corner and other small stores interact with their adolescent customers, to assess feasibility of incorporating components addressing adolescents in the BHS program and to develop reliable evaluation instruments for assessing program impact among adolescents.

Using in-depth interviews, participant observations, focus groups, and a photo diary, this work explored adolescent eating habits, definitions of healthy, and environmental and familial influences on food choices. The study identified new terminologies to categorize foods, and found that adolescent diet in the East Baltimore is shaped by what is available, convenient, and affordable. While adolescents exercise choice in deciding what to eat and when, their decisions are influenced by conditions outside of their control. Decisions of what to buy are shaped by what is available in the community; and decisions of when and why to buy food are associated with perceptions of foods available in the home or at school as either too “nasty,” or of limited supply, to meet their needs.

Based in part on this work, we were able to secure funding from the USDA/FANRP program to support the implementation and evaluation of a feasibility trial of the Baltimore Healthy Stores program. This trial will be implemented in 5-6 corner stores and 2-3 supermarkets in East Baltimore, with a similar number of comparison stores in West Baltimore. Several components of the intervention will be targeted at adolescents, including intervention phases focusing on snacking and beverage consumption, as well as materials aimed at adolescent caregivers (posters, flyers, etc), a comic book targeting adolescents, and other materials. Baseline evaluation is scheduled to begin in March 2005, with the intervention to commence in July 2005.