

South Los Angeles Ban on Fast-Food Chains Misses the Mark

In July 2008, the Los Angeles City Council took the pioneering step of passing a one-year moratorium on opening or expanding fast-food establishments in South Los Angeles,¹ a large low-income area to the southwest and southeast of the city's downtown where obesity takes a disproportionate toll on minority residents.

RAND researchers reviewed the empirical evidence for the ban and concluded that the data do not support it. Although South Los Angeles residents have a significantly higher body mass index and are more likely to be obese than residents of wealthier sections, the area has fewer, not more, fast-food chain restaurants per capita.

To understand the density of various food outlets throughout Los Angeles, the researchers examined the number of fast-food chain restaurants, all restaurants, convenience stores, small food stores (corner stores), and medium and large supermarkets. Comparing the results for South Los Angeles with those for the wealthier West Los Angeles neighborhood and for Los Angeles County overall, they found that:

- **South Los Angeles has a lower density of fast-food chain restaurants.** Per 100,000 residents, it has 19 fast-food chain establishments, compared with 29 in West Los Angeles and 30 in Los Angeles County. There are fewer restaurants of any type per capita in South Los Angeles than in Los Angeles County.
- **Even bigger discrepancies exist with other types of food retailers.** The density of small corner grocery stores in South Los Angeles is double that of the county average and more than three times the number in West Los Angeles. This is partially offset by a lower density of large supermarkets in South Los Angeles.

To understand the eating habits, food purchases, and other weight-related behaviors of Los Angeles residents, the researchers analyzed the results of a RAND survey of 1,480 adults. Again comparing the results for South Los Angeles with those for higher-income areas, they found that:

- **South Los Angeles residents consume significantly higher snack calories, with about half the difference attributable to soda consumption.** In contrast, there is no significant difference in self-reported fruit and vegetable consumption.
- **South Los Angeles residents are less likely to eat at a restaurant during any week, but more likely to purchase prepared food from a food cart or mobile vendor.**

Although the South Los Angeles ban on fast-food chain restaurants recognizes the need for government action on regulating the food environment to address obesity and reduce health disparities among neighborhoods, the fast-food outlet ban is unlikely to be sufficient. One of the stated goals of the ordi-

¹ Los Angeles City Council, Office of the City Clerk, Ordinance no. 180103, effective date: September 14, 2008, available online at http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2007/07-1658_ord_180103.pdf

nance was the hope that sit-down restaurants would replace fast-food outlets. But the notion that sit-down restaurants provide “healthier” food is a misconception, given the steadily growing portion sizes, baskets of bread or chips, and free refills of sugar-sweetened beverages at these establishments.

Better outcomes might be achieved by focusing on the ubiquitous availability of candy, cookies, and sodas sold in both food and nonfood establishments, since the amount of high-calorie snacking is a significant nutritional difference between residents in South Los Angeles and those living in other areas. A focus on reducing portion sizes and the consumption of foods with little nutrient value may also be more promising.

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