



Research Brief
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Targeting Food and Beverage TV Ads at Minority and Low Income Children

Bridging the Gap

African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network

Introduction

In 2009–2010, nearly 17% of U.S. children and adolescents ages 2–19 were classified as obese, including 24.3% of black, 21.2% of Hispanic, and 14% of white children and adolescents. The evidence also showed that obesity prevalence was greater among children and adolescents living in lower-income households. Marketing of foods and beverages that are unhealthy (i.e. high in saturated fat, sugar and/or sodium) to children and adolescents is a probable contributor to the prevalence of childhood obesity.

“Targeted marketing” refers to the common marketing strategy of directing products and product promotions to groups of consumers with similar characteristics. Targeted product advertising may involve placing relatively more advertisements in channels that reach the population segment of interest.

Television advertising can be targeted at local (spot ads) as well as national levels. Local advertising can be directed at racial, ethnic or income groups through placement of ads in local media markets known as “designated market areas” (DMAs). DMA data with information about racial/ethnic characteristics of a local population is available to marketers for use in targeting ad placement.

This study focused on 88 of the largest DMAs in the US. It linked DMA-level Nielsen English language television ratings data from 2003-2007 on the number of televised food ads to Census data on racial, ethnic and income characteristics across DMAs. The study analyzed differences in children’s and adolescents’ exposure to local spot food ads based on the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the DMA. Seven different food ad categories were assessed, including cereals, sweets, beverages, snacks, other foods, and fast-food and full-service restaurants. Several subcategories of beverages were examined including sugar-sweetened versus non-sugar-sweetened beverages and regular versus diet soda. The sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) category included soda, fruit drinks, bottled water with added sugar and sports drinks.

Key Findings

- On average, children’s and adolescents’ exposure to local food and beverage ads was significantly higher in DMAs that had higher percentages of black children and adolescents, respectively, and significantly lower in DMAs with higher median household incomes.
- Each percentage point increase in the respective proportion of black children and adolescents in the population was associated with 2.2 and 2.9 additional food and beverage ads seen, on average, per week by children and adolescents.
- Across restaurant types, the association between the proportion of the child/adolescent black population and advertisement exposure for children was significant for fast-food restaurants but not for full-service restaurant ads. Among adolescents, the association was larger for fast-food restaurant ads compared to full-service restaurants ads.

- Children’s exposure to ads for regular sodas and other SSBs was higher in DMAs with higher proportions of black children in the population, but not for ads promoting diet sodas or non-SSBs. Children’s and adolescents’ exposure to SSB ads was also higher in lower-income DMAs, compared to higher-income DMAs.
- A 10% increase in the proportion of black children in a DMA was associated with 23% higher exposure to SSB ads and 17% higher exposure to fast-food ads and a 10% increase in DMA-level median household income was associated with 27% and 12% less SSB and fast-food ad exposure, respectively.
- The only association observed in this data set with the percentage of Hispanic children or adolescents in these DMAs was lower exposure to ads for full-service restaurants among adolescents.

Conclusions & Policy Implications

Over the five year study period (2003-2007) and across media markets, this study found that lower income and greater black child and adolescent composition were independently associated with significantly higher levels of exposure to food and beverage ads in total. These findings were observed for both children and adolescents for almost all of the seven product categories. Of particular note, the study found that black racial and lower-income groups had greater exposure to fast-food restaurant ads compared to full-service ads. The same groups also had greater exposure to SSB ads compared to non-SSB ads, which is suggestive of targeted marketing of unhealthy products. Analysis of data from Spanish language stations is needed to determine whether this type of targeting also applies to Hispanic children and adolescents.

While reducing exposure to TV ads for unhealthy foods may be challenging, awareness of this type of geographically based targeting among community advocates may suggest a need to further intensify efforts to improve local availability and promotion of healthier food alternatives. Such initiatives might focus on healthy supermarket initiatives, efforts to improve access to healthier foods in schools and near schools, as well as pricing strategies to increase the competitiveness of healthful alternatives. Strong nutrition standards for foods and beverages promoted to both children and adolescents are needed to help reduce exposure to unhealthy products and increase exposure to healthy products. In addition to self-regulation among food and beverage companies, media companies could play an important role serving as a gatekeeper by imposing nutrition standards for any company that wishes to reach the public through its channels.

Despite industry pledges in recent years to promote only healthy products to children, the vast majority of television advertisements seen by or directed at children consists of unhealthy foods and beverages that are high in saturated fat, sugar or sodium. Geographically targeted TV ads for such unhealthy products are important to consider when assessing obesity-promoting influences in black and low-income neighborhoods.

This research brief is based on: Powell, Lisa M., Roy Wada, and Shiriki K. Kumanyika (2014). Racial/ethnic and income disparities in child and adolescent exposure to food and beverage television ads across the U.S. media markets. *Health & Place*, 29:124-131.

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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 affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: [@BTGRESEARCH](https://twitter.com/BTGRESEARCH).

The African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network is a network of US scholars, scholars in training and community research partners committed to improving the quality, quantity and effective translation of research to reduce obesity and related health disparities affecting African Americans. The Network is based at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. For more information, visit: www.aacorn.org.