

Fast-food zoning for health: Lessons from newspaper coverage and legislative debates about land-use policies in U.S. communities, 2001-2013

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In the face of rising obesity rates, public health advocates have suggested zoning and other land-use policies as a promising approach to foster healthy food environments,¹⁻³ including land-use policies to restrict fast-food restaurants.

We identified land-use ordinances to restrict fast-food restaurants proposed around the country between 2001 and 2013 and analyzed news coverage and legislative documents to assess the public debates around them.

Findings

Which communities proposed land-use policies?

We identified 77 communities that proposed 100 separate fast-food-related land-use policies between January 2001 and June 2013. Most of the communities that proposed the policies were small, white and well-to-do. The communities' populations ranged from 529 to 8 million, but nearly 40% had fewer than 10,000 people, and 56% had fewer than 20,000. More than three-quarters of the communities were predominately white, and in two-thirds the average household income exceeded the U.S. average.⁴

Why were land-use policies proposed?

According to news coverage and legislative documents, land-use policies were most commonly proposed to protect community aesthetics (80%). Supporters also frequently described policies in terms of their potential to protect the local economy (61%) or improve quality of life in the community by reducing nuisances like litter and traffic (53%). Almost a third of policies were characterized as improving the walkability of the community (31%).

Improving community nutrition was rarely cited as a rationale for proposing land-use policies (20%). When the nutrition impact of a policy was referenced, policy supporters argued that zoning and other land-use restrictions could prevent obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases.

What differed when land-use policies were focused on nutrition?

More than half (52%) of the policies proposed in communities of color were intended to improve community health and nutrition, compared to a fraction (6%) of the policies debated in predominately white communities. Communities where nutrition-focused land-use policies were proposed also tended to be larger and more urban: 90% of the nutrition-focused policies were proposed in communities with populations exceeding 50,000, compared to 29% of policies that had other rationales.

Only about a third (35%) of the nutrition-focused policies passed, compared to 78% of the policies that focused on non-nutrition-related benefits. News coverage of nutrition-focused policies was also more negative: Just 41% of arguments about nutrition-focused policies supported the proposals, while a strong majority (58%) of arguments about other policies were supportive.

The most common argument that critics leveled against land-use policies intended to improve nutrition was that they represented an inappropriate government intrusion into individuals' personal choices. When nutrition-focused land-use policies were proposed in communities of color, critics of the restrictions sometimes took this line of reasoning a step further and argued that the policies unfairly targeted communities of color.

In contrast with the nutrition-focused policies, people seldom criticized non-nutrition-focused policies as an inappropriate government intrusion. Instead, opponents of policies without a nutrition focus mainly argued that these measures would negatively affect the local economy by discouraging investment and entrepreneurship in the community.

Discussion

This analysis found a clear divide between the debates around land-use policies focused on improving nutrition environments and those focused on other concerns. Nutrition-focused land-use policies faced more opposition, including criticisms that framed the proposed measures as “nanny state” restrictions.

Public health advocates should be aware that presenting policies solely in terms of changing eating patterns may elicit strong counter-framing that portrays these policies in terms of government overreach. In addition, advocates should keep in mind the role of race in shaping the debate around local land-use policies and be prepared to address arguments about the impact of these policies on communities of color.

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