

## TALKING ABOUT: THE RETAIL FOOD ENVIRONMENT

What we eat is influenced by what's readily available in our community. In California, there are more than four times as many fast food restaurants and convenience stores as supermarkets and produce vendors.<sup>1</sup> So it's not hard to see a connection between the lack of healthy food and the high rates of obesity and diabetes crippling our state.<sup>2</sup>

### Why does the retail food environment matter?

Research has shown that living near quality supermarkets can improve health, but not all communities have supermarkets:

- People who live in low-income neighborhoods have fewer places to buy healthy foods than those living in more affluent neighborhoods, in part due to a lack of supermarkets.<sup>3</sup>
- In a multi-state study, African Americans living near a supermarket were 54% more likely to meet nutritional guidelines for fruit and vegetables and 22% more likely to meet recommended limits for fat consumption than those without a supermarket nearby.<sup>4</sup>
- Many poor families have to travel long distances to get to a supermarket, often by public transportation; as a result, it is easier to shop at the local convenience store, where food is often more expensive and less nutritious.<sup>5</sup>

Fast food harms health, yet it is often more readily available than healthier foods:

- Between 1975 and 1992, the number of fast-food restaurants grew 147%, and the number of meals and snacks eaten at fast-food restaurants increased 200%.<sup>6</sup>
- On a typical day, 30% of American children and teenagers eat at least one fast food meal.<sup>7</sup>
- The presence and heavy marketing of fast food in the neighborhood makes it harder for parents to get their kids to eat healthier foods.<sup>8</sup>

### How can we improve the retail food environment?

Several strategies can help shift the ratio of healthy to harmful foods in local neighborhoods:

- **Work to attract grocery stores to under-served areas.** New York City's plan offers tax incentives and zoning exemptions (to allow larger stores than would otherwise be permitted) to developers who will build full-service markets providing fresh produce, dairy and other fresh foods in areas without such stores.<sup>9</sup>

- **Bring small produce vendors to unlikely locations.** Set up a weekly produce cart or farmer’s market at a school, hospital, or other community gathering places.
- **Encourage “market makeovers.”** With some support, many small market owners can provide and promote fresh produce in their stores. Incentives such as small business loans, tax benefits and specialized training on how to manage fresh produce inventories in a cost-effective way can help convert corner stores to a source of healthy food in their neighborhoods.<sup>10,11</sup>
- **Reduce fast food outlets.** Communities can use local ordinances to set limits on the number and location of fast food restaurants, or refuse new drive-through zoning permits as a way of capping the number of fast food outlets.

*Berkeley Media Studies Group’s “Talking About” series provides advocates with straightforward language on how our environment shapes our health, and what we can do to improve both. Supported in part by a grant from The California Endowment. For more information, visit [www.bmsg.org](http://www.bmsg.org).*

## References

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