

Fast-food consumption contributes to poor diet and excess calories among young people. In recent years, fast-food restaurant sales and visits by children and teens have increased. Voluntary and government policies encourage purchases of healthier drinks with kids' meals, and restaurants have added healthier options to their menus. However, it is not clear whether fast-food advertising to children and teens has improved and if it now promotes healthier choices.

According to one market research firm, quick service (i.e., fast food) restaurant revenue sales “are booming.”¹ U.S. sales totaled \$273 billion in 2019, a 37% increase compared to 2014. Although revenues declined somewhat to \$239 billion in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, 2020 sales were 20% higher than in 2014. In addition, online delivery services have partnered with fast-food restaurants, and this market is predicted to continue to grow.²

Fast-food consumption by children and teens has also increased. In 2017-2018, more than one-third of children and teens consumed fast food on a given day, and fast food contributed on average 11.5% of daily calories for children (2-11 years) and 18% of calories for teens (12-19 years).³ These percentages increased significantly from 2009-2010 (8.5% for children and 13.1% for teens), which more than offset declines that occurred from 2003-2004 to 2009-2010. In a 2016 study with parents, 91% reported that they had purchased lunch or dinner for their child (2-11 years) in the past week at one of the top-four fast-food restaurants (McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and Subway), and they visited these restaurants on average 2.4 times in the past week.⁴ These rates were significantly higher than in 2010, when 79% reported visiting one or more of these restaurants with their child in the past week, and they visited 1.7 times on average.

Excessive consumption of fast food is linked to poor diet and weight outcomes in young people. On days they ate fast food, children consumed 126 additional calories and adolescents consumed 310 additional calories compared to days they did not eat fast food.⁵ Fast-food consumption also increased sugar-sweetened beverage calories and sugar and fat intake for both age groups. In a longitudinal study with preschoolers, the number of times fast food was consumed over a year was associated with increased weight status.⁶ In studies conducted in New York City, shorter distance from home to a fast-food restaurant was associated with higher weight status among children⁷ and students (grades k-12) living in public housing.⁸ The largest effects were found among students in grades 3-8 who attended neighborhood schools.

Furthermore, fast-food consumption is higher among Black and Hispanic adolescents,⁹ who also face greater risks for obesity and other diet-related diseases.¹⁰ In 2015-2018, fast food contributed 21.5% of calories consumed by non-Hispanic Black teens, 18.5% of calories consumed by Hispanic teens, and 14.8% of calories consumed by non-Hispanic White teens. Of note, research has not found significant racial or ethnic differences in fast-food calories consumed¹¹ or fast-food visits¹² among children (2-11 years). Access to fast-food restaurants is also higher in predominantly Black neighborhoods,¹³ and child-directed marketing appeared more often inside fast-food restaurants in majority Black (compared to White) neighborhoods.¹⁴ Moreover, from 2000 to 2010 the availability of fast-food restaurants near majority Black, Hispanic, and Asian schools increased in less affluent neighborhoods, but not in similar White and/or more affluent neighborhoods.¹⁵

Industry and government responses to public health concerns

Fast-food restaurants have responded to public health concerns about excessive fast-food consumption primarily by introducing healthier menu items, including in kids' meals, and removing soda from kids' meal menus. Some restaurants have also made corporate responsibility statements and participate in industry voluntary programs and policies to address advertising directly to children.

Corporate responsibility statements

We identified 13 restaurant companies (including 17 individual chains) that made public corporate responsibility statements as of March 2021 (see **Appendix Table 1**). Three restaurants (McDonald's, Subway, and Burger King) promised to provide balanced kids' meal menus, and four (McDonald's, Yum! Brands, Domino's, and Burger King) pledged to market responsibly to children. The remaining statements focused primarily on introducing lower-calorie options to regular menus, offering quality ingredients (e.g., wholesome, authentic, no preservatives or artificial colors), nutrition transparency (e.g., providing calorie and ingredient information), and ingredient sourcing and sustainability. We did not identify any statements regarding marketing or providing nutritious options to teens, Hispanic or Black consumers, or other groups at risk for poor diet and diet-related diseases. Moreover, restaurants that have publicly supported the Black Lives Matter movement and/or racial justice, equity, and inclusion¹⁶ did not promise to change their business practices to address health disparities affecting communities of color.

Consistent with restaurants' pledges to introduce lower-calorie menu items, recent studies have found that calories of newly introduced menu items at large chain restaurants, especially main dishes, declined from 2012 to 2018.¹⁷ In addition, items removed from chain restaurant menus in 2012 to 2015 had more calories than items that remained on the menu.¹⁸ Analyses of children's menu items at chain restaurants from 2010 to 2014 found an improvement in nutrient content of side dishes, including more fruits and vegetables, but no change in main dishes.¹⁹

However, new main dish items introduced in 2012 to 2014 at major restaurant chains had more calories than main dish

items that remained on the menus all three years,²⁰ and mean calories of items on the menu from 2012 to 2018 did not change significantly.²¹ Another study of top burger restaurant chains found no change in the overall nutrition profile of menu items from 2012 to 2016.²² Moreover, the overall nutrient content of kids' meals did not change from 2012 to 2015,²³ and children's main dishes did not change from 2010 to 2014.²⁴ One-third of children's main dishes at fast-food restaurants exceeded recommended levels of sodium, fat, and saturated fat in 2014.²⁵ The Rudd Center's 2013 analysis of kids' meals at the largest fast-food restaurants found that more than 60% of possible kids' meal combinations (main dish, side, and

Table 1. Industry voluntary and government policies regarding fast-food restaurant meals and advertising

INDUSTRY VOLUNTARY POLICIES			
Organization/Company	Policy type	Description	Implementation date
American Beverage Association ³⁰	Kids' meal default beverages	The ABA works with restaurants interested in a voluntary program to make water, milk, or 100% fruit or vegetable juice the default beverage in kids' meals.	2018
National Restaurant Association Kids LiveWell (KLW) ³¹	Nutrition criteria for kids' meals	Participating restaurants must provide at least two kids' meals that meet KLW nutrition criteria.	2011 (revised criteria released in 2019)
Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) ³²	Food industry voluntary program to "improve the landscape of food advertising to children under 12"	19 participants, including two fast-food restaurants (McDonald's and Burger King), pledge to advertise only healthier dietary choices in child-directed advertising.	2007
GOVERNMENT POLICIES			
Jurisdiction	Policy type	Description	Implementation date
Municipality ³³	Healthier kids' meals	Prince George's County, MD Healthy Kids' Meals Bill ensures that healthier beverages and sides are the default with kids' meals and that at least one kids' meal combination meets expert nutrition standards.	May 24, 2021*
State ³⁴	Kids' meal default beverages	Kids' meal menus must only list healthier beverages (e.g., water, sparkling water, plain milk, flavored milk, and/or 100% fruit juice). Policies differ in specific beverages allowed, but all policies permit soda if requested by consumer.	CA: Jan 1, 2019 HI: Jan 1, 2020 DE: July 17, 2020
Municipality ³⁵	Kids' meal default beverages	Kids' meal menus must only list healthier beverages (e.g., water, sparkling water, plain milk, flavored milk and/or 100% fruit juice). Policies differ in specific beverages allowed, but all policies permit soda if requested by consumer.	2016: Stockton, CA 2017: Davis, Perris, Berkeley, Santa Clara County, Cathedral City, Long Beach, CA; Lafayette, CO 2018: Daly City, CA; Baltimore, MD; Louisville, KY 2019: Wilmington, DE 2020: Philadelphia, PA; New York, NY 2021: Cleveland, OH
Municipality ³⁶	Kids' meals with toys	Policies set nutrition standards for single food items and meals sold with a toy or other incentive item.	2010: Santa Clara County, CA 2011: San Francisco, CA
Federal (USDA) ³⁷	Menu labeling	Chain restaurants must disclose the number of calories contained in standard items on menus and menu boards.	May 7, 2018

*Individual requirements to be phased in over a 4-year period.

drink) exceeded recommended calories for an elementary-school-age child and 80% exceeded recommended calories for a preschooler.²⁶ In 2019, 83% of chain restaurants with kids' meals continued to offer soda as a kids' meal drink.²⁷

Industry voluntary policies

Industry organizations and some restaurants have also introduced voluntary policies to improve the nutrition of kids' meals (see **Table 1**). In 2011, the National Restaurant Association launched the Kids LiveWell program, through which participating restaurants commit to offer at least two meals and two side dishes for children that meet specific nutrition criteria.²⁸ They also commit to follow a "default-beverage" policy to automatically include or offer water, milk, or juice with kids' meals (although customers may request other drinks, including soda). In 2018, the American Beverage Association pledged to work with their restaurant partners to voluntarily adopt healthy beverages as the default in kids' meals.²⁹

Since 2013, some of the largest fast-food restaurants (including McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's) have also pledged to remove fountain drinks for kids' meal menu boards, although they are still available with kids' meals upon request.³⁸ McDonald's also began to offer a healthier side (e.g., apple slices) automatically with its kids' meals, in addition to a small portion of french fries.

The Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) represents the primary industry program to limit unhealthy food advertising to children. The CFBAI requires participating companies to pledge that they will only advertise products that meet minimum nutrition standards directly to children under age 12, and a few companies have pledged to not advertise any products directly to children.³⁹ McDonald's and Burger King are the only restaurants in this voluntary program, and they both promise to only show kids' meals that meet CFBAI nutrition standards in child-directed advertising.

McDonald's and Subway have also partnered with Alliance for a Healthier Generation to establish and evaluate policies to market responsibly to children. Consistent with its CFBAI pledge, McDonald's policy requires Happy Meal Bundles shown in children's ads to meet nutrition criteria,⁴⁰ while Subway's policy sets nutrition criteria for Subway Fresh Fit for Kids meals shown in advertising on children's programming, as well as in marketing in stores and online.⁴¹ The Alliance has published evaluations of McDonald's policy,⁴² but the Subway partnership appears to have expired in 2017.

Government policies

Some municipalities and states have also enacted legislation to improve kids' meal nutrition. The earliest kids' meal policies, enacted in 2010 and 2011 in Santa Clara County and San Francisco CA, required kids' meals that came with toys to meet minimum nutrition standards.⁴³ Since 2015 (as of March 2021), 15 municipalities and three states (California, Hawaii, and Delaware) have enacted policies that require healthier beverages to be offered by default in kids' meals. As with voluntary policies, government policies continue to allow other beverages (including soda) to be provided with kids' meals upon request. In 2020, Prince George's County, MD passed a bill that requires healthier drinks and sides to be offered as the default with kids' meals and requires at least one kids' meal combination to meet minimum nutrition standards. In addition to kids' meal policies, as of 2018, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) mandates that fast-food restaurant chains must disclose calories on menu boards,⁴⁴ which applies to all types of menu items.

Although comprehensive evaluations of voluntary and government healthier kids' meal policies have yet to be published, a few studies demonstrate potential limitations to their effectiveness. Five years following its pledge to remove soda from kids' meal menu boards, McDonald's announced that slightly more than half of beverages in Happy Meals were water, milk, or juice (with the remainder presumably soda).^{45,46} An analysis of healthier kids' meal pledges at major fast-food restaurants showed they were associated with increased selection of healthier sides with kids' meals, but not healthier drinks or purchases of kids' meals.⁴⁷ Implementation appears to be a major limitation of both voluntary^{48,49} and government^{50,51} healthier kids' meal policies, as restaurant personnel continue to offer soda automatically in a high proportion of kids' meal orders. Another study that examined kids' meal nutrition from 2012 to 2015 found that restaurants who participated in Kids LiveWell reduced the calories in main dishes but increased calories in sides relative to restaurants who did not participate, with no change in overall kids' meal nutrient content.⁵²

Another limitation of healthier kids' meal policies is that kids' meals represent only a portion of fast food consumed by children and teens. In a 2016 study, two-thirds (66%) of parents who visited a fast-food restaurant with their young child (ages 2-5) for lunch or dinner and less than one-half (46%) who visited with an older child (ages 6-11) reported purchasing a kids' meal for their child. Moreover, 29% of those who purchased a kids' meal also purchased another item (such as a dessert) for their child, and this percentage increased significantly compared to 2010. In a study that included children and some teens (15% of the sample), 31% of caregivers purchased a kids' meal for their child during a restaurant visit.⁵³

Measuring progress in fast-food advertising

Many factors likely contribute to frequent fast-food consumption by children and teens, including convenience, low cost, kids' meals and toys, and easy access to fast-food restaurants.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ Extensive advertising of fast food is another. In one study, increased exposure to fast-food advertising specifically was associated with an increase in fast-food consumption among elementary school-age children.⁵⁷ In another longitudinal study, preschoolers with moderate or high exposure to child-targeted fast-food ads on TV were approximately 30% more likely to consume fast food during the past week.⁵⁸

Extensive exposure to unhealthy food marketing increases young people's preferences, purchase requests, attitudes, and consumption of the primarily nutrient-poor energy-dense products promoted,⁵⁹⁻⁶¹ and numerous studies have demonstrated that fast food is the most frequent food category advertised to children and teens. Fast food represented 40% of all food marketing expenditures directed at youth consumers (2-17 years),⁶² as well as 26% of all TV food ads viewed by children and 31% of ads viewed by teens in 2017.⁶³ Fast food and other restaurants represented 52% of all food and beverage advertising spending in 2017.⁶⁴ Previous Rudd Center reports have documented the billions of dollars U.S. companies spend to advertise fast food, primarily promoting nutritionally poor products (see **Table 2**).⁶⁵⁻⁶⁷

Table 2. Fast-food advertising FACTS: 2012 and 2016-2017

<p>Fast-food advertising in 2012⁶⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fast-food restaurants spent \$4.6 billion in total advertising, an increase of 8% versus 2009. ▪ Preschoolers (2-5 years), children (6-11 years), and teens (12-17 years) viewed on average 2.8, 3.2, and 4.8 fast-food ads on TV daily. ▪ Six companies – McDonald's, Subway, Burger King, Domino's, Yum! Brands (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC), and Wendy's – were responsible for more than 70% of fast-food TV ads viewed by young people. ▪ McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway advertised their kids' meals, but kids' meals represented just 24-25% of fast-food TV ads viewed by preschoolers and children. ▪ Fast-food advertising on Spanish-language TV totaled \$239 million, an increase of 8% from 2009. ▪ Hispanic preschoolers viewed over 40% more fast-food ads on Spanish-language TV than did Hispanic children or teens, but just 5% of these ads promoted kids' meals. ▪ Black youth viewed approximately 60% more fast-food TV ads than did White children and teens, averaging 3.9 ads-per-day for Black children (2-11 years) and 6.3 ads-per-day for Black teens (12-17 years).
<p>Fast-food advertising on children's TV in 2016⁶⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two fast-food restaurants belonged to the Children's Food & Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) – McDonald's and Burger King – and pledged to advertise only healthier dietary choices on child-directed TV. ▪ McDonald's placed more advertising on children's TV than any other food-related brand, with preschoolers and children seeing 132 and 152 Happy Meal ads, respectively, on children's TV. It spent \$32 million to advertise Happy Meals (4% of total ad spending), but Happy Meals represented approximately 75% of McDonald's TV ads viewed by preschoolers and children. ▪ Burger King did not advertise its kids' meals on children's TV, but the restaurant ranked first in total food-related TV ads viewed by preschoolers and children on other TV programming. It was responsible for 94 and 101 ads viewed, respectively, which promoted regular menu items on non-children's TV programming. ▪ Subway also spent \$7 million to advertise its kids' meals (2% of total ad spending) and primarily advertised its kids' meals on children's TV. Kids' meals represented 12 and 16 ads viewed, respectively, by preschoolers and children, approximately 20% of total Subway TV ads viewed. ▪ Wendy's, Sonic, Papa John's, Pizza Hut, and Domino's Pizza advertised other menu items (not kids' meals) directly to children on children's TV.
<p>Fast-food advertising targeted to Hispanic and Black youth in 2017⁷⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Top Black-targeted brands (with >\$1 million in ads on Black-targeted TV) included Taco Bell, Domino's, Burger King, Wendy's, Arby's, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Little Caesars, Subway, Sonic, and KFC. Black teens saw 1.9 to 2.5 times as many ads for these same restaurants compared to White teens. ▪ Taco Bell and Domino's spent the most to advertise on Black-targeted TV (>\$12 million), Arby's spent the highest proportion of its total ad budget on Black-targeted TV (5%), and McDonald's had the highest Black teen targeted ratio (2.5). ▪ Top Hispanic-targeted brands (with >\$5 million in ads on Spanish-language TV) included McDonald's, Subway, Wendy's, Taco Bell, Domino's, Popeyes, Burger King, and Little Caesars. ▪ McDonald's and Subway spent the most to advertise on Spanish-language TV (\$58 and \$47 million, respectively). Subway, Wendy's, and Popeyes allocated 13% or more of their TV ad budgets to Spanish-language TV.

In May 2010, the World Health Assembly unanimously adopted a set of recommendations to reduce the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children up to age 17 and urged their adoption by governments.⁷¹ Improving unhealthy food advertising aimed at children, teens, and Black and Hispanic youth, including fast-food advertising, represents an urgent public health priority to address the crisis of poor diet and health-related diseases affecting young people.

The current report

In this report, we update previous Fast Food FACTS reports^{72,73} and document 2019 advertising spending and TV advertising exposure for fast-food restaurants. We answer the following questions about fast-food advertising to youth:

- How much did fast-food restaurants spend on advertising in 2019? How has fast-food advertising changed since 2012?
- How many TV ads did young people see and what products were advertised to them?
- How much of children's exposure occurred on children's TV channels?
- How much fast-food advertising appeared on Spanish-language TV, and how many ads did Hispanic youth see?

- How much fast-food advertising was targeted to Black youth, including advertising on Black-targeted TV channels and disproportionate advertising to Black versus White youth?
- Which fast-food restaurants were responsible for the most advertising in 2019? How did advertising practices differ between restaurants?

We did not have access to food industry proprietary documents, including privately commissioned market research, media and marketing plans, or other strategic documents. Therefore, we do not attempt to interpret fast-food companies' goals or objectives for their marketing practices. Rather, we provide transparent documentation of advertising that promotes fast food to children and teens and changes in advertising expenditures and exposure over time.

In recent years, fast-food restaurants have introduced healthier menu items, and many have removed soda from kids' meal menu boards. Some have also pledged to advertise only healthier kids' meals directly to children. However, research has not examined whether they have begun to promote healthier menu options in their advertising or reduced the billions of dollars they spend to target high-calorie nutritionally poor products to children, teens, and communities of color. Independent research is necessary to continue to monitor fast-food restaurant advertising to children and teens.