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Fat to go: Sacramento County among state's worst in food study

Vendors of fast fare vastly outstrip healthier food stores, and obesity rates reflect it.

By Dorsey Griffith - Bee Medical Writer

Last Updated 5:58 am PST Friday, January 19, 2007
Story appeared in MAIN NEWS section, Page A1



Fast food is abundant at Marconi Avenue and Villa Vista Way. A group advocating healthy eating wants easier access to nutritious food. Sacramento Bee/Lezlie Sterling

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Sacramento County has nearly six times as many fast-food restaurants and convenience stores as it does supermarkets and produce vendors, helping explain why the battle of the bulge is a hard-fought war.

A new study of retail food outlets in California put Sacramento County second only to San Bernardino County in its lopsided ratio of healthy food markets vs. those offering bucket-sized sodas, or bacon-draped double cheeseburgers.

Researchers hope the data will prompt city and county planners and policymakers to consider ways to better balance the placement of retail food outlets when approving new development projects.

They say offering financial incentives to vendors, for example, may entice them to expand their nutritious offerings.

"We are not saying let's close down all the McDonald's and 7-Elevens, said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the Davis-based California Center for Public Health Advocacy, which conducted the study. "We're saying let's make sure cities and counties make purposeful choices in their zoning and use of redevelopment funds to make sure we have access to healthy food."

Taking stock of where food retailers locate is important, Goldstein said, in light of recent studies in some cities that found higher obesity and obesity-related mortality rates near higher concentrations of fast-food restaurants.

"What people eat is influenced by the environment in which they live," Goldstein said. "We wanted to know what it looked like in California."

The researchers used commercial data sources and geographic information system software to do the study.

They constructed what they called a "retail food environment index," or RFEI, by adding the number of convenience stores and fast-food outlets and then dividing that sum by the number of supermarkets and produce vendors, including farmers markets.

What they found was a variation in the RFEIs for various communities. While Sacramento County's score was among the highest, at 5.66, Santa Cruz County scored just 1.84, the lowest measured.

The city of Sacramento came in fifth among 13 large cities, with a score of 4.97.

The county data roughly correspond to county adult obesity rates reported in 2001 by the state Department of Health Services.

With a 21 percent adult obesity rate, Sacramento County is home to some of the largest people in California.

Santa Cruz County, on the other hand, has a 15 percent obesity rate.

The findings in Sacramento County didn't surprise Melissa Guajardo, who promotes healthy communities on behalf of the Sacramento-based Health Education Council.

"Our frustration has been that we go into low-income neighborhoods where they have histories of poor health - often diet-related -- and we talk about eating healthier and getting more physically active," Guajardo said. "What we haven't been able to address is their ability to find the food they need to eat and want to eat locally."

Guajardo points to the south Sacramento neighborhood of Avondale-Glen Elder, where there are plenty of convenience stores but little readily accessible fresh produce.

One such market, Fast Stop Food Store on the corner of Fruitridge Road and Wilkinson Street, is stocked with plenty of snacks, liquor and household items but carries a limited menu of healthy food options.

Still, Fast Stop serves a steady flow of customers, many of whom live in apartments next door.

One of the regulars is 84-year-old Mattie Wiggins, who lives just around the corner. Every day, Wiggins makes her way to the store, assisted by a cane, to buy items for herself and her 60-year-old diabetic and disabled son.

On Thursday, Wiggins picked up cigarettes, beer and a package of all-beef bologna -- a snack for her son. She said if the store had fresh oranges or pears, she'd buy them.

"They don't have that," she said, "just in the can. Maybe I don't want it in the can."

Wiggins said she makes it to the supermarket, seven blocks away, only occasionally.

Sacramento County Health Officer Dr. Glennah Trochet said the research adds to a growing understanding of environmental influences on eating habits.

"I am not advocating restricting the numbers of fast-food outlets or convenience stores," Trochet said. "But state and local policymakers should ... make it as easy to find healthy foods as it is to find fast foods."

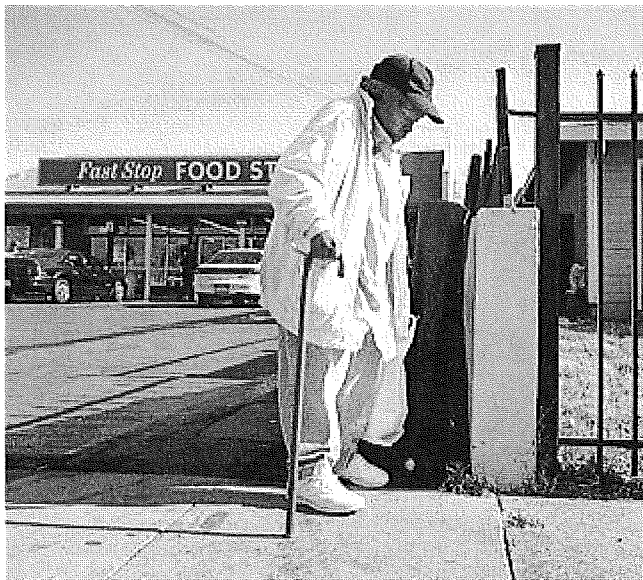
Sen. Elaine Alquist, D-Santa Clara, plans to introduce a bill that would provide state grants to small retailers to help them expand their healthy food stock.

But George Whalin, a retail management consultant in San Marcos, doubts that government meddling could dramatically influence the retail food landscape, since demographics and economics drive business decisions.

"Retail is simple," Whalin said. "They look at the numbers. If they don't make sense, they don't want to be there. If they can't generate enough revenue, they will leave."

About the writer:

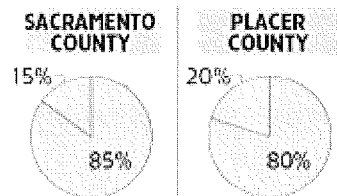
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Mattie Wiggins, 84, walks home from the Fast Stop Food Store after buying bologna for her son. She lives seven blocks from a supermarket. Sacramento Bee/Kevin German

Retail food outlets

-  Fast-food restaurants and convenience stores
-  Supermarkets, produce vendors and farmers markets



Source: California Center for Public Health Advocacy

Calculating the 'food environment'

A new study compared the number of different types of retail food vendors in California's most populous areas to produce a 'retail food environment index' - a measurement of the availability of nutritious food.

RFEI formula:
 (Number of fast food restaurants + convenience stores)
 ÷
 (Number of supermarkets + produce stores + farmers markets)

Food index scores compared with obesity rate

County	Food environment index	Adult obesity rate (2001)
San Bernardino	5.72	23.7%
Sacramento	5.66	21.4%
Fresno	5.34	26.6%
Orange	5.13	14.9%
Solano	5.08	22.8%
Kern	4.87	25.6%
Stanislaus	4.79	25.2%
Contra Costa	4.66	20.1%
Riverside	4.63	20.6%
Alameda	4.61	17.9%
Los Angeles	4.60	19.8%
Tulare	4.42	24.3%
Santa Clara	4.32	15.4%
San Diego	4.20	16.2%
STATE AVERAGE	4.18	19.1%
San Joaquin	4.03	26.6%
Ventura	3.86	16.6%
San Francisco	3.85	11.9%
Placer	3.84	15.7%
Santa Barbara	3.00	18.1%
San Mateo	2.79	16.8%
Sonoma	2.52	13.8%
Monterey	2.14	25.5%
San Luis Obispo	2.01	15.7%
Marin	1.85	10.9%
Santa Cruz	1.84	15.1%


Note: The study did not compare counties with populations of fewer than 250,000.
 Sources: California Center for Public Health Advocacy, California Department of Health Services.
 Sacramento Bee/Nathaniel Levine

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