Assessment of dietary outcomes in food environment research: A barrier to policy and programs to support healthy eating?

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SUMMARY
- **Purpose**: To evaluate approaches to assessing dietary outcomes within the field of food environment research.
- **Methods**: Review of studies published between January 2007 and May 2011, identified from the U.S. National Cancer Institute’s Measures of the Food Environment website.
- **Results**:
  - Examination of 71 food environment studies that included at least one measure of dietary intake indicates a tendency toward the use of dietary assessment instruments with low cost and respondent burden at the expense of accuracy and precision.
  - Almost one in three studies made use of a screener and >15% used only 1-2 questions to assess dietary intakes.
  - About 30% of studies made use of a food frequency questionnaire.
  - More detailed methods, such as 24-hour recalls or records, were used in about one in five studies.
- **Conclusions**: Measurement error in dietary intake data collected as part of food environment studies:
  - May be substantial, particularly if estimates are based on brief instruments and appropriate analytic methods are not employed.
  - May lead to spurious findings and reduced statistical power to detect relationships between features of food environments and diet.

BACKGROUND
- Significant growth in research examining the impact of food environment features on health outcomes, including obesity and diet.
- Difficult to draw conclusions from this literature due to methodologic differences among studies and lack of accuracy and precision in dietary measures.
- Self-report dietary assessment data contain significant measurement error.
- The type and extent of error and the effects on study results depend on the assessment instruments used and analytic methods employed.
- The aim of this study is to examine dietary measures used in food environment research.

METHODS
- Review of studies published between January 2007 and May 2011, identified through examination of the U.S. National Cancer Institute’s Measures of the Food Environment website (riskfactor.cancer.gov/mfe),
  - Updated weekly using PubMed searches and key terms including food environment and food deserts.

RESULTS
- 187 studies assessed a relationship between food environment features and a health outcome (Fig. 1).
- 71 studies included at least one measure of dietary intake.
- Tendency toward the use of brief assessment instruments (e.g., screeners, 1-2 questions) that tend to be less expensive to administer and impose less respondent burden in comparison to more detailed methods (Fig. 2).

DISCUSSION
- Tendency for food environment researchers to employ dietary assessment instruments that are low in cost and respondent burden at the expense of accuracy and precision.
- Error in intake data can:
  - Mask relationships that actually exist.
  - Reduce statistical power.
  - Result in spurious findings.
- Barrier to environmental-level policy and program interventions to facilitate healthy eating.

RECOMMENDATIONS
- Use detailed and precise measures for all study variables, including dietary outcomes.
- Take advantage of technological advances to collect more detailed dietary data.
- Adopt techniques from other fields of nutrition to reduce and correct for measurement error in dietary data.