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Food Away From Home America's Changing Food Choices



...Upfront

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Foods Away From Home

This issue of *FoodReview* focuses on food away from home. A reflection of our rising prosperity is consumers' increasing willingness to pay for service and convenience, especially when it comes to food. The restaurant and fast food industries have grown for several decades as food manufacturers and retailers alike race to develop products that are easier and faster to prepare at home (often with a microwave oven) or that require no at-home preparation at all. Currently, Americans spend almost half of their food budget on prepared meals at eating places.

This ongoing change in what we eat—and where we eat it—has wide-ranging implications for researchers and policymakers. One important issue is the minimum wage. The restaurant and fast food industries, which employ fully half of all food system workers, employ by far the most minimum wage workers. Many are part-time and on average are younger and less educated than the rest of the U.S. workforce. Legislation aimed at increasing the minimum wage is expected to disproportionately affect the food system, especially the foodservice sector. But evidence collected after the 1997 minimum wage hike suggests that the effect on the prices of food away from home prices was not substantial, and a 50-cent future increase is predicted to translate into at most a 1-percent increase in away-from-home food prices.

Increasing consumption of food away from home and processed foods raises questions about the nutrient intakes of individuals, especially children. There is evidence that children today are developing poor eating habits, and that their diets actually deteriorate with age. Nearly all restaurant foods and fast foods consumed by children are higher in fat than are school foods.

The rapid growth in fast food reflects a strong demand for quick and convenient meal choices as well as the industry's success in making fast food as convenient and as readily available as possible. For example, fast food outlets are appearing in department stores, office buildings, and gasoline stations—all in an effort to increase convenience. At the same time, consumption of processed foods has surged, more than doubling between 1972 and 1992, as Americans seek foods that are quicker and easier to prepare at home.

While the growth in consumption of processed and away-from-home foods reflects our Nation's rising prosperity, 1 in 10 Americans still do not have enough to eat. Food assistance expenditures have been falling, in part because of the strong economy and in part due to changes in food assistance policies. Food banks are an increasingly important source of food for the needy. In the Mid-Atlantic region, a typical food bank annually distributes about 14,000 pounds of food, much of which is unmarketable surplus donated by the food industry. But as food manufacturers and retailers more efficiently manage and dispose of food inventories, charitable donations become more difficult to obtain. Policymakers need information on the role of food banks in providing for the needy, especially when contemplating changes in food assistance programs.

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